

# cineACTION!

A MAGAZINE OF RADICAL FILM CRITICISM & THEORY

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## CANADIAN CINEMA



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Front cover: Atom Egoyan's *Family Viewing*





## A note from the editors

Casually looking at the foreign film collection in a local video rental outlet, we were impressed by a small but significant collection of Canadian and Québécois films under the same heading: Foreign Cinema.

Canadian culture as foreign culture indicates the extent to which we succumb to and internalize a dominant culture — the extent to which the institutions and technologies of capital manage and reproduce in each of us a recognition of ourselves as foreign in our own cultural landscape. More than ever, Canadian cultural interpolation needs rigorous interrogation. Such are the questions that *CineAction!* as a radical [Canadian]

magazine of film theory and criticism must address.

This issue of *CineAction!* is devoted to Canadian cinema. Its aim is not to discover some essential national identity, nor is it to help spawn some New Canadian Consciousness, but rather it is to provide a space, within the pages of this magazine, for a serious consideration of cultural specificity.

Questions of naming and identity have always been at the forefront of a dialogue on Canadian film. Even interpretations of Québécois cinema (defined within its regional context) find consensus of definition difficult. In the past, English-



Canadian work has typically offered a thematic analysis of narrative films, emphasizing "character," "powerlessness," "colonialism" and "place" in terms of a 'true' Canadianism versus an imitation of Hollywood. At its most sophisticated, this kind of work has played a useful role in the development of Canadian culture; it has emphasized the historic difficulty of establishing a truly independent and definable form of self-expression. At its most reactionary, this approach has afforded an easy blueprint.

The dangers of an ultranationalism, elaborated in several articles in this issue, are obvious: bourgeois nationalism merely reproduces a dominant hegemony which feeds and is fed by capital. The goal of a progressive national film culture is to generate a space that neither adopts the myopic blueprints of nationhood or the flattening overview of internationalism (with its often disguised over-arching imperialism). Such a space resides between this double hegemony, in a politics of locality.

A Canadian cultural specificity is understood

here as a body politic. It is understood as a body of resistances that defy and undercut our own cultural amnesia. These resistances, the development of particularized cultural expressions, emerge precisely from the recognition of shared experiences, shared political struggles, shared memories: from community.

We are committed to cultivating new critical discourses and frameworks for writing and reading Canadian cultural practices and traditions without, at the same time, accommodating an ahistorical sentimentality. Central to this task is the critical investigation of the socio-economic conditions that construct the nation, the terms that define and make possible its expression, the relations that it sets forth and reproduces at the micro-level of everyday experience. This issue of *CineAction!* marks the beginnings of our commitment to the on-going examination of Canadian film culture.

**Janine Marchessault**  
**Kass Banning**



Louise Cardi is left to "carry on" in *Carry on Sergeant!*



# THESES ON CANADIAN NATIONALISM:

In memoriam George P. Grant

by Michael Dorland

"It is a time for strategic discretion."

- ROBERT BOURASSA ON THE OCCASION  
OF THE SIGNING OF THE FREE-TRADE DEAL

*Ubi panis, ibi patria*

- OLD ROMAN TRUISM



I

**ALL CANADIANS** are nationalists: from the Shefferville (sell 'em our resources or they'll close us down) nationalism of a Mulroney, to the rag-trade (sell 'em everything and if they refuse, we'll close them down) nationalism of a Riesman, to the 'we only accept a good deal' nationalism



of a David Peterson, to the 'we always accept a good deal' nationalism of a Robert Bourassa. Whereas nationalism elsewhere has usually been conceived, like the nation itself, as one and indivisible, Canadian nationalism is, like the nation itself, infinitely divisible, from the sell-out nationalism of the Mulroney Conservatives, to the regional nationalisms of a Quebec, a Saskatchewan, or an Alberta; from the opportunistic nationalisms of the various federal or provincial elites to PetroCanada, Air Canada or Molson's corporate nationalism. And beyond these, but infinitely diffused and generally silent, yet nevertheless deeply felt, the multiple nationalisms of the Canadian people itself.

## II

**FOR NATIONALISM** in Canada has never been (and cannot be) a nationalism of the whole nation, but always a nationalism of its parts. As a partial nationalism, Canadian nationalism has always been a nationalism of "limited identities" (J.M.S. Careless). Like Canada, Canadian nationalism is federate. As a limited or federate nationalism, Canadian nationalism has always required the security of an external empire within which to realize itself; be that the British Empire, the American *imperium*, or the *francophonie*. Yet internally, in confederated Canada, that is, Canada conceived as a miniature British empire, only Ontario (as the Empire province) could realize an expansive colonial nationalism within the federation; the nationalisms of Quebec, the Maritimes and the West have been predominantly defensive. In unblocking Canadian nationalism from its internal impasses, free-trade with the United States in the present circumstances has, therefore, to be seen as the *culmination* of Canadian nationalism, the self-cancellation of a limited nationalism within the greater 'global' nationalism that Canadian nationalism has always aspired to be a part of, although not within Canada but outside it.

## III

**FOR THE FIRST TIME** since the beginning of the century, Quebec is at the forefront of the new (self-cancelling)

Canadian nationalism, particularly in provinces such as Manitoba and Ontario that both embody fragments of alternate visions of a 'national purpose,' the one loosely socialist and the other more firmly capitalist, that represent today the chief obstacles to the internal unanimity finally available to Canadians through free-trade. In their opposition to free-trade, the old nationalists invoke such concepts as "Canadian sovereignty" or "Canadian culture," oblivious to their meaninglessness to Canadians. For both sovereignty and culture, like nation, suggest an indivisibility, an uncompromisibility completely foreign to Canadian experience and, in fact, to Canadian nationalism. For Canadian nationalism, new or old, has never been anything more than a desire for the recognition of autonomous or associated status, and this holds as true for the Dominion as it does for Quebec nationalism's question-seeking associated sovereignty. It is as impossible for Canadian nationalists to speak of sovereignty or culture as it is impossible for Canadians to speak of the Canadian nation. In this sense, Canadian nationalism is always and only a discourse of sentiment, not a discourse of politics and even less a discourse of economy.

## IV

**IN ADDITIONAL OBJECTION**, the old Canadian nationalism, because it knows that the discourse about sovereignty and culture is untenable, falls back upon such indicators of Canadian "difference" as social programmes, a less predatory social philosophy, and (ultimately) job-loss. All three of these "differences," however, are but the articulation of one: the inability of Canada to realize its own political economy, an inability *compensated for* by social programmes, the regulation of which necessarily produces a less predatory social philosophy, but at the same time regularizes the fundamental incapacity of the Canadian political economy to guarantee its citizens anything better than "welfare." Protesting for or against free-trade only obscures in sentiment the harsh fact that the principal failure of Canadian nationalism, new or old, lies in what it has always claimed as its distinction, namely political economy.



## V

**A POLITICAL ECONOMY** is neither only the articulation of the economic by the political (as in socialism or advanced capitalism) nor only the economification of politics (as in regressive capitalism). Political economy is the dialectical articulation of politics and economy by culture. In this sense, Russell Berman is completely correct when he writes that "the first line of defense of American world power is culture, not cruise missiles." Quite apart from the question of world-power, it is precisely the American *political economy* that, throughout the 1986-1987 free-trade negotiation (from such issues as softwood lumber, shakes and shingles, to the US constitutional separation of powers), so perplexed and puzzled the Canadian opposition numbers. Unable to understand political economy (and so that even within capitalism, there can be differing political economies) the Canadians constantly mistook for an inter-elite fix what is nothing more complex than an old-fashioned clash of national interests. What the free-trade negotiations and the drafting of the text and treaty have shown, however, is that Canadians have an understanding of political economy that is equivalent to their experience. As George Grant once put it, "Branch-plant economies have branch-plant cultures."

## VI

**FREE TRADE** is thus to Canada the same recognition of

"distinct society" status by the United States that the Meech Lake accord is to Quebec within Canada. If the latter can produce political unanimity (*pace* the Indian nations and the nation of women), why should the former not? The alternatives would be continental disengagement by Canada and further constitutional debate between Quebec and Canada, wearying, not to say impossible, options given Canadian cultural fatigue. It is far more appropriate for Canadian nationalism to embrace its self-cancellation, in the reassurance that Quebec too has now embarked upon its Canadian fate by integral entry into the *imperium* while still daydreaming of a (linguistic) sovereignty of its own.

## VII

**CANADIAN NATIONALISM** has to confront the likelihood that it no longer has anything left with which to speak to the issues of the day. The new Canadian nationalism has already done as much. It is the old nationalists that, like ghosts, can still be heard lamenting. But if once a lament for a nation was a possibility, it was because there still remained a trace of Canada's atavistic memory. Since then conservatives have turned into liberals, liberals into conservatives, and the socialists into technocrats: of the "antique wind" of Canadian politics, there is left only a fetid stench. In such a pass, Canadian nationalism may yet catch one last glimmer of self-reflection and see itself finally: as a shadow of speechless disapproval. ■

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# THE SCHWARZENEGGER POEMS

by Jim Smith

A special limited edition,  
published by The Surrealist Poets Gardening Assoc., 1988

Available postpaid for \$5 payable to L. Necakov,  
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# THE UNCERTAIN



# TRUMPET

Genevieve Bujold in Paul Almond's *Isabel* (1968).



# DEFINING A [CANADIAN] ART CINEMA IN THE SIXTIES

by Peter Morris

"If the trumpet give an uncertain sound,  
who shall prepare himself for battle?"

1 CORINTHIANS

"Opinion, then, may act as a preservative.  
That it also has a destructive force is a  
fact both obvious and, in discussions of  
value in the arts, neglected . . . Opinion is  
the great canon-maker . . ."

FRANK KERMODE, *FORMS OF ATTENTION*

*[This essay was originally presented at the First Annual Wendy Michener Symposium at York University in October 1987 and is published as given, with minor editorial emendations. Wendy Roland Michener, a writer and CBC producer, was a significant cultural voice in the 1960s when she presented perceptive and penetrating analyses of the arts (especially film) in both English Canada and Quebec. She died January 1, 1969, at the age of only 33.]*

Criticism has only rarely been given its deserved place in cultural histories. Criticism is used primarily by historians as supporting evidence of whether particular works were well received or badly received at the time of their creation. Indeed, some people would argue that the study of criticism as such is not particularly productive since criticism rarely amounts to anything more than the opinions of a few, significantly placed, individuals. However, there are a number of studies of criticism that are clear exceptions to this argument. For example, there are the analyses of the remarkable symbiosis of criticism and creation that marked the emergence in France of *la nouvelle vague*. (It is worth noting that this symbiosis had an interesting parallel in Quebec in the early '60s.) More recently, Serge Guilbaut [*How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*] has studied criticism in relation to abstract expressionism and its links to US cultural hegemony in the '40s and '50s.

These particular studies exemplify how criticism can both directly





stimulate creation and support a particular style. My analysis of film criticism in English-Canada is from a different perspective: how criticism can play a negative role in a particular creative development. I am referring here to the development of a particular form of Canadian cinema in the '60s. This was a cinema which presented itself as different from Hollywood film, an *alternative* to Hollywood film. In the then current phrase, it was an 'art cinema.'

As I shall try to show, one relevant aspect of this '60s understanding of an art cinema as an alternative to Hollywood is that, although English-Canadian critics seemed comfortable with the general concept of an art cinema, most of them resisted applying the concept to English-Canadian film. As, indeed, they did to Quebec film since the reception given to Quebec films by English-Canadian critics was not essentially different from that given to English-Canadian films. There were some noteworthy exceptions (of whom Wendy Michener was certainly one) but most English-Canadian critics seem to have found it impossible to discuss a Canadian film in the same terms as a French, Italian or Czechoslovakian film. In this, they stood in clear contrast to their colleagues in Quebec. One question for the historian to consider about this period is why most English-Canadian critics should have been so negative towards Canadian films in the '60s.

Criticism, or more precisely, contemporary criticism, is primarily concerned with that canonical construct known as 'quality'; what distinguishes good work from mediocre? The critic's role is essentially evaluative, perhaps even prescriptive, directing the reader to what the critic considers worthy of attention. Judgment and choice are crucial, even in our own times when such theories as semiotics, structuralism, feminism and Marxism have forced serious critics, at least, into a self-conscious awareness of their own roles as critics. But in the '50s and '60s that late-modernist critical self-awareness was not even debated as an issue. Critics tended to think of themselves as either arbiters of public taste or leaders of public taste. As Clyde Gilmour (then working for the *Vancouver Province*) wrote in *Maclean's* in 1947: "I keep telling my audience that what it's hearing is only my opinion. However, I enjoy backing up my opinion as vigorously as possible." Critics, of course, did not usually think of themselves as unique sources of wisdom. They were aware that they were writing opinion

but considered that, since their opinions were well articulated and based on certain standards, their reviews carried more weight than mere opinion. None of the critics, however, discussed the source of those standards.

Standards (and a set of shared standards is necessarily canonical) do not emerge from the void. Criticism is no more neutral than creation. Both critics and creators are part of the culture in which they live. In Elwy Yost's evocatively wacky phrase, "we are all embedded in the cheese of our time." What is of interest, then, is why English-Canadian film critics and Canadian film makers should have expressed such radically different sensibilities at an identical point in time. Indeed, one could argue that critics and film makers stood at radically opposite poles not only on what made cinema 'art,' but also on what kind of cinema Canadian cinema should be. Out of that opposition, it was, arguably, the critics' views that prevailed and that encouraged both government policies and film making itself towards the industrialized model of production that dominated Canadian film from the early '70s.

In order to understand the relevance of this issue to Canadian cinema in the '60s, it is necessary to examine the common elements in English-Canadian criticism both at that time and in the earlier period. In other words, it is necessary to consider the terminology critics used to characterize a 'good' film, the terms they used to define what they meant by quality. From this, it should be possible to consider the ways Canadian films of the '60s met those implicit standards or in what ways they failed to do so.

In examining this background, I have drawn extensively on film criticism from the '40s, '50s and '60s published in English language newspapers and magazines: *Maclean's*, *Saturday Night*, *The Canadian Forum*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star* and *Telegram*, the *Montreal Star* and *Gazette*, and the *Vancouver Sun* and *Province*. (One might note that, until the '60s, there were no magazines in English Canada devoted solely to film criticism, though there were in Quebec.)

While there is a wide variation in opinions about individual films, there are also quite consistent patterns of thought. None of the critics of the period wrote an article expressing a particular vision about film, but certain common ideas and even phraseology recur throughout their reviews and lead

one to conclude that there was indeed a shared sensibility at work.

However, there were some differences within that shared sensibility that are also worth noting. Firstly, there were those critics who demonstrated a continuing concern for Canadian film. These almost constitute a separate subgroup since their responses to the '60s films clearly stemmed, not from indifference to Canadian film (as might arguably be true for other critics), but from a commitment to it. Foremost here was Gerald Pratley, a critic who consistently insisted that Canadian films merit proper critical attention.

A second difference in sensibilities lies in the distinction that can be made between the established generation of critics (several of whom had been active since the '40s) and a group of younger critics who emerged in the '60s. Among them, notably, were three women: Joan Fox, Germaine Warkentin and Wendy Michener. I will discuss later the differences from the general pattern because they are particularly significant. But I intend to focus initially on what one could legitimately consider the dominant mainstream of critical thought in the post-war years. In other words, what the canonical assumptions were about film and its role in the world that Canadian film makers faced in the '60s. What follows, while offered as a kind of 'extended' quotation, is comprised of direct quotations from reviews of the period, some paraphrasing and a kind of editorial suturing. While it is not possible in an oral presentation to identify the sources of the original phraseology, this collage is offered as a kind of collectivised vision of a particular critical approach.

## THE CRITIC'S VISION

"The seemingly endless flow of puerile pap, synthetic sex and technicolour goo can be attributed to the fact that the average mental age of audiences is fifteen. It is well-known that Hollywood protects its enormous investments by aiming at the lowest common denominator in the audience. The public, far from knowing what it wants, is ready to accept almost anything and make the best of it. The rationale of the box office does not necessarily express the tastes of moviegoers. On the other hand, there are signs that film makers can be encouraged to make films about subjects that demand and deserve thought. Fewer



and fewer people now go to the movies in a purely escapist mood. Audiences are beginning to *think* in the luxurious hypnotic dark of the movie theatre. Film criticism is concerned with raising the standards of the art. It can make people critically aware of the content of films. Critics can influence the kinds of films available by raising the standards of audience expectation.

"Film cannot live without ideas from men with creative imagination. However, we cannot forget that film is a composite art. Criticism assesses the quality of achievement in each area: in script and story; in photography and the visual; in acting; in setting and background; in music; in editing; and in direction. These various elements must flow together in an overall unity.

[Note that, while the critics were concerned with assessing film as a composite art, there was also an awareness that this was something imposed, in part at least, by the film industry itself.] "The price of efficiency in production is often that all individuality is ironed out. A film takes shape like an automobile on an assembly line from the original conception to the final polish job. The production process is big and vertical where it should be small and horizontal. Industrial production means a bankruptcy of inspiration. Because of industrial production, the present-day movie is forced to be painfully obvious in subject matter and technique. The movie hucksters have a lower set of values than the public whose pockets they pick. Hollywood is capable of steering a safe course between the vulgar and the high-brow but too often it panders to the worst elements in the audience.

"However, despite the imperatives of the box-office, good films do get made, even if they are comparatively rare. The quality film [One might almost dub it the *idealized* quality film] brings together all the elements of the composite art. They are matched, blended and integrated in order to achieve consistency, cohesion, pattern and logic; woven together to create a unity. A film fails when it lacks purpose, when it is constructed episodically, or when it is created in a mixture of styles.

"Unity is important because it creates or reveals a sense of purpose, a sense of purpose that might

be related to a controlling directorial intelligence. Unity comes from a rounded completeness; it depends on credible characters and narrative, certainly, but also on a consummate economy that weds detail to action, and does not divert interest into trivial episodes nor insert humour as deliberate comic relief. The sense of unity of a film gives the impression that everything unfolds seamlessly, in a perfect pattern or flow.

The most important element in the creation of unity is *flow*. Flow carries the audience in a definite and purposeful direction. A film flows visually. Actors are carried along in the flow of feeling. A quality film has an uninterrupted flow of camera logic. Flow gives a perfect shape to every sequence and a perfect rhythm, visual and aural, to the whole film. Flow, indeed, is the poetry of film because it derives from the essential, defining, characteristic of film — the element of *movement*.

" 'Moving images' are what separate film from the other arts, they define its uniqueness as an art form. But this defining characteristic is also the biggest potential threat to the overall unity of the film. Images and cutting, used for their own sake, only detract from what should truly engage us — the narrative and the characters. Praising a film for good photography is almost like claiming that a book can be judged by its cover. The visual often becomes mere rhetoric, mere effect that detracts from active participation in the atmosphere and action of the story. Technique should never display itself, though it has its proper place within the unity of the film. Technique, like the script, is never evident but is essential to the film's totality.

"Film is also the most important of the arts. It may be a new art, but it is, above all, a new international language. It can speak to peoples everywhere. It can reveal the ways other people live. In the new post-war, it is more important than ever that people should get to know each other, that they should know how their neighbours live, and what are their difficulties, desires and fears. Film is both universal and pacifist, since it knows nothing of conflict between nations. Film is not only an art it is also a means of public information and education. Film can entertain,

enlighten and inform. It is not only a new means of entertainment, it is a new way of influencing the taste, modes of life and emotions of unlimited numbers. After six years of debilitating war, we are aware that man is a universal animal facing universal questions. Though mankind is divided into nations or cultures, we are all facing the same human plight. The common lot of mankind is to be prey to symptoms of a perverse or decadent imagination. But this moral dilemma can be faced if we accept that mankind is universal. Film enables civilized man to be brought close to the feelings and lives of other peoples. When true to life, it can confront us with all the facets of human behaviour. Film can help us understand the agony of ordinary people caught in succeeding waves of misery, the sources of which are never clear to them.

[We might note here that, not only was film considered a composite art struggling sometimes against an unsympathetic industrial system, it was also an *international* art that was concerned — or at least *ought* to be concerned — with carrying a humanitarian message to the world. In this connection, the critics' concept of 'realism' was the touchstone.] "The quality film avoids misrepresentation of place and character for the sake of convention or the susceptibilities of romance. [This embodies the quest for 'authenticity,' a term the critics generally preferred to 'realism.'] At their best, films make contact with the living world. This is not merely a question of mirroring reality. Indeed, actuality by itself is often too sprawling to be satisfactorily engaging in a film. Similarly, a documentary film is either too detached or too didactic to generate an emotional response from the audience. Authenticity or realism can be obtained through artifice, a simulation of actuality through technical skills. Artifice can concentrate in a single moment what the lazy eye and mind take hours to see and comprehend. When heightened by the emotions revealed in the story, this can achieve a special power. Attention to significant details in designing a room can persuade us of the realism of the scene as we submit to the movement of the story. Beyond this, though, the absolutely authentic film is one in which there is never a moment when it does not feel like



real life, does not feel true to life. Authenticity brings us close to real people and real places, especially everyday people and everyday places. But this is not simply a question of providing a convincing representation, nor a question of repeating accurately what can be seen and heard around us. Realism gives a total emotional experience of people and events so that the truth shines from the screen. Realism is the truth of experience and it is always unsentimental in its portrayal of life with all its simple hopes and joys. Realism in film is a way of affirming our faith in humanity."

## THE CRITIC'S ASSUMPTIONS

**I**mplicit in these attitudes towards defining the quality film are five assumptions. The first of these is that it is possible to distinguish between film as commerce and film as art. This was then a relatively new idea. Although it had been argued since at least the early '20s that film was an art, this idea had taken many years to take root in general thought. Even more recent, at least in North America, was the idea that the standard theatrical feature film might be discussed in such terms. However, Canadian critics were then as up-to-date as any in the world in arguing that one could distinguish between a film made merely for money as an industrial product and one that genuinely and sincerely reflected a particular vision. It was this assumption that conditioned the rise of the art cinema and its acceptance in North America. It was also an assumption that played a role in critical reactions to Canadian films in the sixties, as I will suggest later.

The second assumption concerns unity, credibility and a coherent narrative. The source of that assumption is familiar to everyone and it was far from a new idea. However, it is also an aesthetic criterion that had already been challenged in various ways in the other arts, and was similarly challenged in film in the late '50s and early '60s in what was then called the 'art cinema.' While much else was thrown into question by film makers at that time, nothing was perhaps more seriously questioned than the assumption of organic unity as a criterion of quality. As a corollary, these film makers also challenged the assumptions that film is a composite art, with each element contributing its measured share towards the whole. And this challenge came as much

from Canadian film makers in the '60s as it did from European.

It is around this challenge to the assumption of unity, that one can first detect the schism that was to mark both English-Canadian criticism in the '60s as well as the responses of critics to Canadian films of the period. This schism was, in part, generational. Many established critics found great difficulty with a film such as *A bout de souffle*, describing it as "formless, structureless and meaningless." To the younger critics, the form and structure were both apparent and unproblematic and equally determining of the film's meaning. A comparable division of responses is apparent in reviews of such films as *A tout prendre*, *Le chat dans le sac*, and even *Nobody Waved Goodbye*.

The third critical assumption relates to concepts of realism. It is not necessary to explore here metaphysical ideas about realism since it is clear there were three basic principles conditioning what Canadian critics meant when they referred to 'realism' or 'authenticity.'

In the first place, realism for the critics was essentially a *moral* imperative not an aesthetic one. Realism was essentially equated with *truth*. "True to life" is so recurrent a phrase in the critics' vocabulary that it often threatens to become a cliché. However, in the second place, and perhaps paradoxically, realism was primarily a question of *artifice*, a method that, at its best, brought about an emotional sense of 'truthfulness.' Realism had very little to do with observation or the representation of everyday life. In consequence, the use of actual locations in a film rather than constructed sets, was considered of minimal aesthetic merit. In fact, it might well be a negative virtue since the use of real locations potentially took away one element of film making that could be controlled and structured as part of the overall unity. Though this attitude was tempered somewhat in the '60s under the influence of European art films, the use of location shooting remained an element about which it was barely worth remarking. It might be noted that one of the most dominant characteristics of Canadian films in the '60s was the use of actual locations. However, for most Canadian critics this was an insignificant element that, at best, offered evidence of a low production budget and, at worst, signalled the amateurishness of the film makers.

This critical assumption regarding realism was paralleled by a general disdain for the documentary film — Canadian or otherwise. Most Canadian crit-

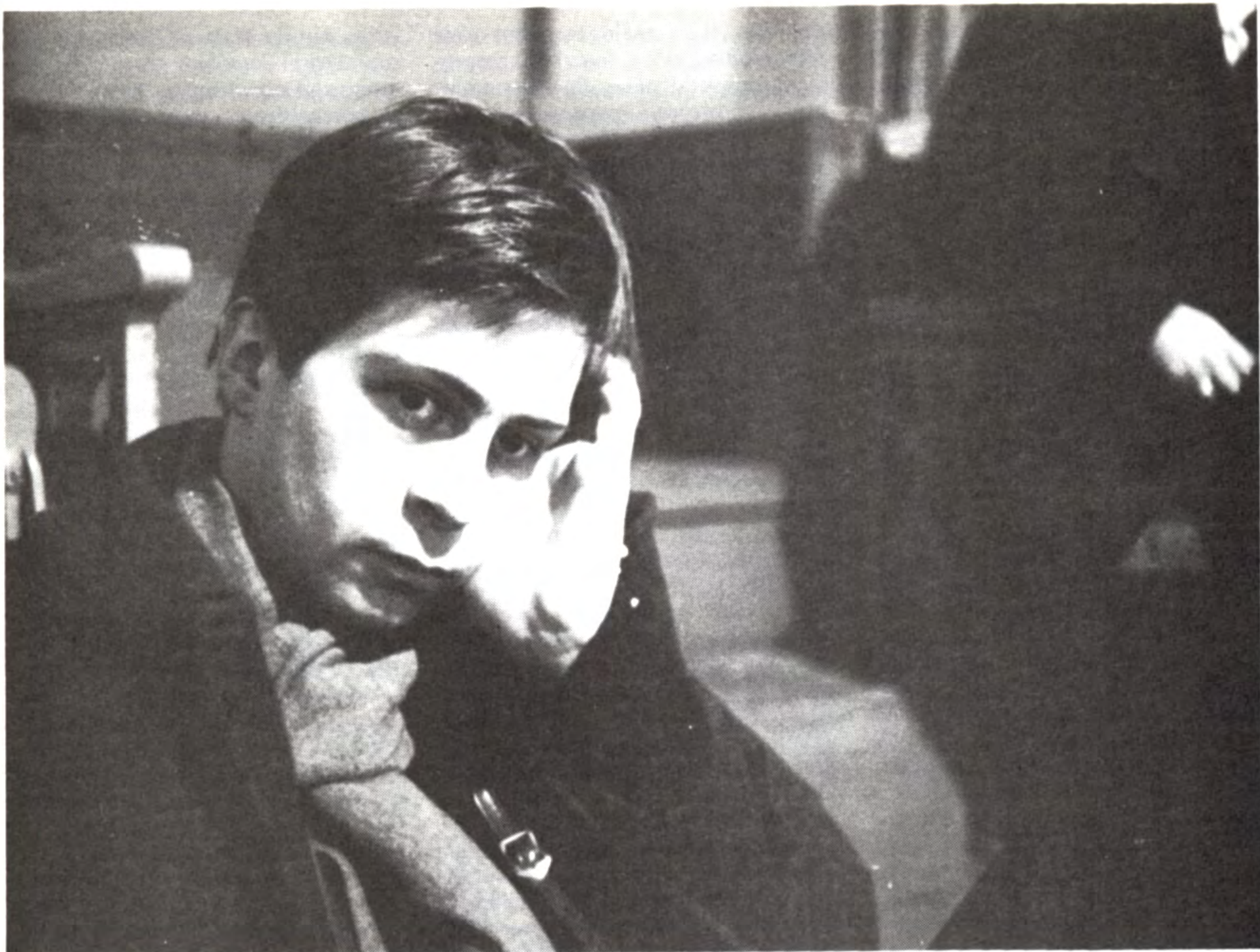
ics ignored the documentary but, when it was discussed, it was most commonly castigated for lacking most of the elements critics considered essential in a quality film. (The single exception to this pattern was Gerald Pratley who reviewed Canadian documentaries in *Canadian Forum* for several years in the fifties. It is also worth noting that Peter Harcourt first drew international critical attention to the uniqueness of Canadian documentary in a major article in *Sight and Sound* in the mid-'60s.

The third principle conditioning the critic's conception of realism was that a film was always considered inherently more realistic if it depicted lives other than those of the North American wealthy or the middle class. A film that dealt with the disadvantaged, people in the margins, was more likely to be praised for its 'realism,' its truthfulness and considered more worthwhile. This was especially true if the film portrayed such lives elsewhere in the world than North America. In other words, a film was considered more realistic if it dealt with the 'everyday,' but especially an everyday different from that experienced by the majority of Canadians who attended films.

The world depicted in Canadian films of the '60s was predominantly, though not exclusively, an urban, middle class one. For Canadian critics at least, it was not a world that offered new revelations and, for some critics, was evidence of the film makers' self-centredness and lack of maturity since they were failing to grapple with serious human problems. We can take this point further by noting that the world of Canadian '60s film was also a one dominated by what would be later characterized as 'youthful, existential angst.' For the younger generation of Canadian critics this was not only unproblematic but highly relevant. On the other hand, to the established critics, they were only further evidence of immaturity and the lack of a meaningful, coherent vision. As an example, I would cite the contrasting reviews of *Nobody Waved Goodbye* by Joan Fox (in *Canadian Forum*) and Frank Morriss (in the *Globe and Mail*).

Clearly relatable to the critics' humanistic conception of realism is the fourth assumption that conditioned Canadian criticism: an assumption that *subject matter* is always more significant than *voice*. While critics paid proper critical attention to the various filmic elements that were orchestrated into a unity, with the director as conductor, the final criterion of judgement was invariably the *worthwhileness* of the theme. I am





Gilles Groulx's *Le Chat dans le sac* (1964).

reminded here that Walt Whitman is generally considered the first true US poet, not because of subject matter but precisely because of the manner of speaking, the voice. I am also reminded that the Group of Seven in its 1920 manifesto emphasized this same aspect — though they used the term “spirit” rather than voice to emphasize that the manner of speaking was more significant than subject matter. Canadian film critics, however, consistently underestimated or denied this aspect and certainly would not have accepted Zen aesthetic which maintains that there are no great subjects. Nor, indeed, did they accept a similar argument that “there are no great themes only great film makers,” an argument advanced in Europe in the '50s and '60s, especially in France in the magazine *Cahiers du cinema*. This argument has become historically crystalized around “la politique des auteurs,” which emphasised that, to understand a film one had to understand the ‘voice’ of its author, not the ostensible subject matter. For most Canadian critics, however, this poten-

tially undermined two of their key assumptions — film as a composite art and the importance of the theme.

[I should perhaps note that, when I refer to the ‘voice’ I am not subscribing to an ‘auteurist’ (as the directors’ cinema has been called) vision of film. I am referring to a different set of assumptions under which the film makers and the established critics were operating. And the idea of ‘voice’ embraces more than the simple idea of the director as author — not least the significance of culture and gender.]

Canadian film makers of the '60s, both in Quebec and English Canada, embraced wholeheartedly the notion of ‘voice.’ I do not intend to imply that they found theme unimportant, only that for them the manner in which the theme was spoken, the voice of the film maker, was crucial. (And ‘voice’ in this context implied more than simply the Romantic vision of the individual artist.) Here again are the signs of the schism between the film makers and the critics. Here, too, there is a difference between the established critics and the

younger generation that emerged in the '60s and that included Wendy Michener, Joan Fox and Germaine Warkentin. For these critics, their assumptions matched those of the film makers more closely, not least on the issue of voice.

The critics’ assumption about ‘voice,’ brings me the fifth but by no means least of the assumptions. This is the assumption that film is an international language, an assumption that relates closely to the assumption about the insignificance of the voice. The assumption that film was an international language was one of long standing, in Canada and elsewhere. Most Canadian critics active around 1960 would not have disagreed with a statement by John Grierson in his 1944 *A Film Policy for Canada*: “What is the difference whether a film comes from Hollywood or Timbuktu or Saskatchewan, so long as it is about the life of man as it is lived and dreamed in common everywhere.” The position Grierson takes in his statement was one reiterated over many decades by critics all over the world. It



was also a position consistently espoused by Hollywood itself. Hollywood's commercial interests were best served by a general agreement that films were essentially international in their appeal and that the origin of films was immaterial. Hollywood has argued since the '20s that its films are merely entertainment and have no relationship to cultural questions, either in the United States or elsewhere.

This position also had strong critical credentials, not least in a body of French intellectual thought — though I doubt most Canadian critics were aware of the academic justification for their assumption that film was an international language. The foundations for the academic study of film were laid in France in the post-war years under the name of *filmologie*, a so-called "science of film." This evolved under the influence of Gilbert Cohen-Séat's *Essai sur les principes d'une philosophie du cinéma*. Though this book discusses many issues, one central argument is that cinema, as a collective representation, is not only a democratic art but also one that is inherently universal. The author argues that, because the film image is universally understood, it has a unique humanist potential. From the standpoint of democracy, it is a means of bringing disparate groups together and of uniting individuals separated by "biological, social or intellectual privilege." This notion of a universal cinema evidently involves the effacement of national and cultural differences as elements of voice. It is also an argument that seems oblivious to the existence, or potential existence, of traditions and techniques that might be alternatives to the dominant commercial cinema.

These theories concerning the universality of the cinema were very influential in post-war thought. However, they did not go unchallenged. For example, they were vigorously opposed in the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma*. In fact, the magazine once published a satirical article called "Introduction to the Filmology of Filmology." Eventually, the theory of a universal cinema lost ground to the idea of a cinema based on national, cultural and other differences — a cinema, one might say, based on 'voice.' It is undoubtedly true that the '60s was the period in which numerous national cinemas emerged on the world scene — or, in some cases re-emerged for the first time since the '20s.

In any case, the established Canadian critics tended to carry over the assumption concerning a universal cinema into their judgements of Canadian films of

the '60s. Here again the films were found sadly lacking, found too parochial and inward-looking. For the younger critics, however, this narrowness of focus was a virtue. Recurrently in the reviews by Wendy Michener, Germaine Warkentin, Joan Fox and others, there are references to the strong sense of 'place' that the films evoke. I will quote just one example, a review by Germaine Warkentin of films shown at the 1964 Montreal Film Festival. After pointing out that "the intense and cultivated naturalism of *cinéma vérité* is this group's native language" and that "all three films concern pairs of young lovers who faced problems of responsibility and find no solutions," she argues that these films are "profoundly youthful and intensely provincial." In the same review she also refers to an earlier film, *The Drylanders*, as having been "received with delight in the West and panned by a number of Eastern critics." For her, however, "there is something plain, literal and surpassingly eloquent about the image of the prairies at a certain time that *The Drylanders* gives us." In fact, this single article alone implicitly denies virtually every assumption previously held by Canadian critics — as, indeed, do other writings on Canadian film by the younger critics. Perhaps the only exception to this is the assumption regarding the distinction between film as commerce and film as art.

This returns me to that assumption, one that might lead to an understanding of why it was the views of the established critics that prevailed and not those of the younger critics.

I will refer briefly here to the writings of Frank Underhill, especially his response to the Massey Commission Report. I refer to them not because I assume his ideas were influential in some direct sense on Canadian critics, but because they encapsulate a particular strand of cultural thought in Canada in the post-war years. This concerns US mass media and its impact on the Canadian scene. Frank Underhill had no great sympathy with twentieth century mass culture and its greatest progenitor, the United States. Nor did he have much sympathy either with the masses who responded to it. This is expressed quite clearly in his response to the Massey Commission Report: "It is not that the Canadian public is apathetic — the masses everywhere are apathetic." He also argued that Canada could never develop a national culture because it could never develop one in isolation from the US and its mass culture. He

wrote that the Massey Commission was mistaken in describing US movies, television and advertising as "alien." It was mistaken because these elements were precisely the products of mass production civilisation. Underhill suggested that, just because these twentieth century offerings seemed "so unbearably vulgar and anti-intellectual," was no reason to turn away from the Americans. Canadian culture, he wrote, was being challenged by the growth of "a North American continental culture." He was pessimistic about the potential for any indigenous Canadian culture, and even Quebec culture, in the face of mass culture from the south. As he wrote in reference to films: "The fact is that, if we produced Canadian movies for our own consumption, they would be just as sentimental and vulgar and escapist as the Hollywood variety." Underhill, however, also suggested artists might resist the influence. The way ahead, he wrote, was to create "something different and better" than mere mass culture — a proposal that, implicitly at least, points the way to an art cinema. Yet, at the same time, he seems to argue that Canadians necessarily had to accept the imperatives of a North American mass culture.

Frank Underhill's views reflect a strand of cultural thought in Canada that had considerable impact in the '30s but which diminished in influence through the '50s. This attitude (which has been characterised as "pessimistic nationalism") was shared, I believe, by the post-war English-Canadian critics. The majority of them (including most certainly the nationalist critics) genuinely wanted to see emerge in Canada a cinema that would be "different and better" than US mass culture. But they found it impossible to contemplate this in other than traditional terms. While most of the critics wanted, even encouraged, a Canadian art cinema, that cinema had to conform to their long-established assumptions about what defined 'quality.' In addition, the critics could also not wean themselves from the assumption, emphasised by Underhill, that film is a mass medium (at least in North America, though not, perhaps, in Europe). From this perspective, films necessarily had to reach large audiences. In order to do so, it followed that films needed certain minimum requirements: a reasonable budget, well developed technical skills and a clearly defined story and script with a persuasive theme. It is clear that the critics felt that none of these requirements existed in Canada in the



'60s. At the same time, it seems to have been irrelevant that the filmmakers themselves had little interest in following these requirements. It is almost as if the critics wanted Canadian films to be *better* than Hollywood films yet also wanted them produced according to the industrialised model of Hollywood and to be as popular as a Hollywood box-office hit. One might almost think that the critics preferred a particular '60s headline in *The Economic Post* to the films themselves: "Canada Has a Real, Live Hollywood All Its Own." In any case the English-Canadian critics are an interesting example of an observation George Grant made in *Lament for a Nation*: "Canadians want it both ways. We want through formal nationalism to escape the disadvantages of the American dream; yet we also want the benefits of junior membership in the Empire." It is, I think, this attitude of the critics that helped condition the development of Canadian film policy towards an industrialised model in the '70s.

The film makers of the time and the younger critics did not share these attitudes, nor the assumptions. Their

nationalism was more assertive than pessimistic. Film for them demanded more than the recycling of plots and characters and themes, however worthy. Nor, indeed, was film primarily an industrialised mass medium. Such rules as there were might be broken.

I will end by offering the critical reviews of one film as an example of the schism in the '60s between filmmakers and the critics and of the schism between the established critics and the younger ones. *Isabel* is the first feature film directed by Paul Almond who already had a well-established reputation as an award-winning director of television dramas. When the film was released in 1968, it was well received in New York and by francophone critics in Montreal. Toronto critics, however, were almost uniformly negative in their responses, and negative in ways that reflect the assumptions I have argued characterised their writings. The film was described by most Toronto critics as an uneasy mixture of a character study and a horror story. Its effects were over-elaborate and self-indulgent. The characters lacked credibility and the

theme was uninteresting. The director was too much concerned with imposing himself on the screen and too little concerned with developing an overall structural unity.

In contrast, Wendy Michener described the same film as "an exceptionally fine first feature . . . a remarkable and fascinating movie [that] works equally well as supernatural thriller and psychological drama . . . Shot entirely on location, inside and out, the film glows with the special light reflected from snow and water . . . [*Isabel*] is a consistent and personal film . . . Almond is perfectly qualified to present, as he does here, the Canadian experience — whole."

The responses to this single film in a sense summarise the negative impact most English-Canadian critics had on the development of Canadian cinema in the '60s. In a sense, too, Wendy Michener's very different response summarises both what we lost and what we might have hoped for in Canadian criticism, had she not died so soon after writing that review. □

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# RHETORICAL REMARKS TOWARDS THE POLITICS OF OTHERNESS

by Kass Banning

"Otherness has its own laws and interdictions [. . .] And difference in this context undermines opposition as well as separatism. Neither a claim for special treatment, nor a return to an authentic core (the 'unspoiled' real Other), it acknowledges in each of its moves, the coming together and drifting apart both within and between identity/ies. What is at stake is not only the hegemony of Western cultures, but also their identities as unified cultures: in other words, the realisation that there is a Third World in every First World, and vice-versa."

TRINH. T. MINH-HA

## Preamble

Setting: The Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada

Event: Grierson Seminar November 1987

Annually, a select group of filmmakers, critics, and "educators" nestle down in some cosy Ontario town to discuss documentary film. Historically, discussion is polite and predominantly content-based, relying on the subject matter filmed, or auteurist in focus. (The vitriolic voice, however, has occasionally registered. At an earlier seminar, one indignant filmmaker threatened another with fisticuffs.) Librarian organizers watch from the periphery of the room, silently policing behaviour, dictating the banality of discussion — show and tell. (The event is sponsored by the Ontario Film Associa-

tion. Purchasing "media social-work" for libraries is its constituency's primary task). Invited participants do in any case show up: the event is highly funded, marketed as prestigious (an international "star" usually attends) and filmmakers are always hungry for screenings. Perhaps the authority of Grierson beckons.

The 1987 Grierson Seminar, set in Toronto for the first time, was uncharacteristically momentous — events marked a turning point, historically and personally. A particular conflict played itself out on various fronts, in different combinations, replacing the consensus politesse of previous seminars.<sup>1</sup> Even the customary jockeying for approval gave way to a more pronounced rivalry. The struggle comprised a peculiar activity: contender-filmmakers competed for the position of "the other."

Discussions, paradoxically, often approximated the operations Tony Wilden outlines in his controversial work, *The Imaginary Canadian*.<sup>2</sup> Among other determinants, such as how oppositional practice is mediated by structural domination, Wilden claims that the Canadian imaginary is constituted through the positing of "the other"; hegemonic self-definition is necessarily formulated by one group's projection of its undesirable attributes onto others. Such manoeuvres, according to Wilden, necessarily complement the divide-and-rule relations lived in late capitalist colonized countries — specifically Canada. Wilden's grab-bag approach, rubbing existential theories of the subject, such as Sartre, and Fanon, up against Canadian social and economic history and relations is wonderfully wacky, and, at times, forced. Yet Wilden's account of



how cultural production is organized in a first-world colony, is a refreshing (and often depressing) antidote to the view which limits domination strictly to class relations, not allowing for contradiction, ambivalence or coercion on the individual subject's part. In short, hegemony. The Grierson seminar's testy deliberations were not, however, entirely symptomatic of imaginary relations; they were inflected by the demands of the marketplace. As Coco Fusco has succinctly named it: "the other is in."<sup>3</sup> Yet how this recent interest, with all its inherent combinatory effects, mutual constraints, etc., actually affects so called "marginal" cultural production or determines its reception, remains a complex, immediate and *delicate* area of concern.

At the same time, the debates played out and resembled what Michael Dorland characterizes as the quintessential Canadian response to modernity — *resentiment*.<sup>4</sup> Dorland's cataloguing treatise on Canadian resentment suggests that the Canadian psyche displaces its multi-reasoned and well-deserved feelings of inadequacy by eradicating difference, and this has a minimalizing effect: Canadians are thus burdened with heavy doses of resentment. In an interesting appendix to the theses of Wilden and Dorland, seminar participants resisted acknowledging the other's otherness.

The desire to appropriate a centrality for particular marginalities swiftly became manifest. Participants arrived with their marginal baggage intact. Québécoise filmmakers on dominant Anglo soil felt an obvious entitlement to the "privileged other" title, as did representative blacks, women, lesbians and gays. Within the "otherness" hierarchy, however, feminism did not fare too well — such concerns were viewed with suspicions of insiderism. (Of late, both inside and outside the seminar's walls, charges of either "taking over" or coercion have been levied at feminism. Disfavour, once again, attends market demands for "the shock of the new": feminism's relative longevity and apparent co-option deems its usefulness defunct — hence it is no longer "in." And other marginal groups who have recently made sufficient gains would benefit from acknowledging the endangered nature of their own hard-won procurements.)

This particular reading of relations at the seminar does not intend to diminish or conflate the very lived oppression of the outsider. The exclusionary and precarious reality of the outsider status,

the difficulty inherent in getting "inconsequential positions" voiced in the first place within the dominant regime, was indeed brought home when a representative from a state television network (TV Ontario) suggested that next year's Grierson seminar should return to a more "balanced programme." Nor does it seek to diminish or ignore the many amenable political alliances negotiated between outsiders under divide-and-rule pressure.

Coalition politics are, at any rate, tenuous and a "politically correct" elision of differences between and within communities still takes place under the banner of late capitalism, with all of its patriarchal inscriptions intact, and often leads to the obliteration of a more complex analysis of contemporary politics, cultural and otherwise. Feminism's belaboured historical battle with the orthodox left offers but one familiar illustration. The subjugation of blacks by white ethnics provides a further variant. Simon Watney's recent theorising on AIDS, voiced at both a recent Toronto lecture series (Countertalk: The Body, November '88) and in his book *Policy Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media*, illustrates how marginal positions are indeed relational. The obvious rigour, the tremendous contribution to the sustained analysis of AIDS and representation, etc., notwithstanding, Watney's over-arching desire for inclusion cause his arguments to bear strains of misogyny. Watney charges feminism with homophobia (represented by Julia Kristeva and Jane Gallop) because feminists have failed to analyse male homosexuality. At worst, one could perhaps charge Kristeva and Gallop with omitting a consideration of a male homosexual economy in their deliberations and this could be viewed, perhaps, as heterosexist. At best, their individual work on female subjectivity — one which posits a female economy — offers an extremely rich and promising departure for lesbian feminist theorising. The elaboration of models that stress women's relations can hardly be condemned as heterosexist.

This much too brief illustration suggests how the left, new or old, is a diverse, factionalized construct. Claims of a left perspective do not erase attachments to the dominant or exemption from human foibles, including individuals who use their individual socially defined category of the oppressed to oppress others. Under late capitalism, relations between "others" are relational, shifting and downright ambivalent at times. Peaceful co-

existence provides convincing publicity but between *ourselves* it is necessary to develop more critical ways of acknowledging and articulating the very complex and often diffuse relational nature of differences. Our collusion with structures that dominate minorities (and their disguised functioning) must be taken into consideration.

Moments of contestation, such as those evident at the Grierson seminar, moments that indicate the confusion of margins and centres (with the accompanying re-evaluation of *fixed* categories of oppression) only hint at the complexity of modernity. Participant others identifying themselves as "the Other," had to, not only share that position, but were forced, eventually, to re-consider their investment in being outsiders. And it is just such moments that point to the necessity for a more sophisticated approach to questions of centre/periphery and domination/subordination. Trinh Minh-ha's formulation, "that there is a Third World in every First World, and vice-versa" is suggestive of just such an approach: it calls for a counter-hegemonic model for elaborating difference.

One seminar film, *The Passion of Remembrance* (produced by the Sankofa collective and co-directed by seminar participant Isaac Julien) opts for complexity by adopting such a model. It negotiates the problem of otherness as a political necessity and thus avoids a monologic single-issue approach to its subject — black Britain — by exploring the way in which the (often conflicting) issues of race, class, gender and sexuality relate to black communities. And the seminar's response to the film and its director, emotions ranging from miscomprehension to downright hostility, indicates just how right on track the film actually is. Director Julien, black, gay, making theoretically sophisticated claims for his practice in working class London dialect, was deciphered as "noise." Ditto the film: by linking racial identities to social and political factors *The Passion of Remembrance* exceeds the expected formulae of race-relations documentary. (In general, social problems particular to "blackness" are set up in relation to the white dominant and become naturalized in the race-relations documentary.) The given categories do not apply to this film which perhaps accounts for its response at the seminar and the hoop-la which has accompanied it since elsewhere — a sense of new possibilities. And this "something new" arises, among other determinants, from a hybridizing ten-



dency, the attempt to find a new language adequate to articulate the heterogeneous realities of contemporary Black British experience.

### Signposts from "There"

The fact of the matter is that it is no longer possible to fight racism as if it had its own, autonomous dynamic, located between white people or the police on the one hand and blacks on the other. The problem of racism arises *from every single political development* which has taken place since the New Right emerged.

STUART HALL

**S**ankofa, the group that produced *The Passion of Remembrance* is just one of four black film collectives presently working in Britain: Black Film and Audio Film Collective, Ceddo and Retake as well. Black Audio's recent *Handsworth Songs* (1986), with Sankofa's *The Passion of Remembrance* have made a tremendous impact at home and on the international festival circuit. They have, indeed, been taken up (celebrated and debated) by both the white avant-garde and the third world film communities.<sup>5</sup> The proliferation of material on these films discourages discussion here; their reception (and conception) remains compelling. It can perhaps illuminate some of the contradictions and complexities which accompany the critical acclaim of "marginal" works. That is, the mainstream's (the New York art scene included) celebration of these films (*The Passion of Remembrance* and *Handsworth's Songs* in particular) accommodates a central paradox — de-marginalization. The centre, characteristically, has consumed this "something new." "Raiding" the margins to sustain the illusion of avant-gardism is hardly a recent activity, and not *ipso facto* an immoral one; the margins have always been common fodder for the centre, be it cultural, agrarian, or multi-national. Assimilation has not, in point of fact, exhausted the cultural and political significance of these films.

London's art schools and the polytechnics helped spawn this new generation of practitioners: a generation which identifies itself as both Black and British, who examine what this confluence means in contemporary Britain to *themselves*. *The Passion of Remembrance* forges an oppositional aesthetic through an engagement with traditional diasporic concerns, while working in a dramatic hybrid form that mixes the dramatic popular form with archival Black



Director John Smith with cast of *Sitting in Limbo*.

historiography and avant-garde techniques. *Handsworth Songs*, again, is hybrid in form, a documentary that juxtaposes the Brixton riots with reworked archival footage of black historiography. One image stays with the viewer — the repetition of an optically printed image of Black emigres departing from a ship and stepping on to British soil — has an almost ghostly resonance.

The radicalization of British cultural politics, one that leads to the formation of these film collectives, was due, in part, to the riots (or uprisings) of '81. These events, in conjunction with less dramatic ones, such as the coming-of-age of black British children and their limited placement into the various media sectors, contributed to government action. Policy initiatives were "compelled" to provide funds for independent Black-related cultural expression.

### Here: Our Home and Racist Land

"... the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, or the radical critics speaking for them; this question of representation, representing others, is a problem. On the other hand we cannot put it under the carpet with demands for authentic voices; we have to remind ourselves that, as we do this, we might be compounding the problem even as we are trying to solve it. And there has to be a specific critique of what one is up to, so

that it doesn't get all bogged down in this homogenization; constructing the others as simply an object of knowledge, leaving out the real Others because of the ones who are getting access into public places due to these waves of benevolence and so on. I think that as long as one remains aware that it is still a very problematic field, there is some hope.<sup>6</sup>

GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK

**I**n comparison with the British activity, things do not, at first, appear as active in Canada. Canadian black produced film imagery remains a rarity — Canada cannot boast such film collectives. Various factors contribute to this disparity: different patterns of immigration or more directly, Canada's '60s racist immigration policies has contributed to a black population that is just coming-of-age;<sup>7</sup> Canada, supposedly, has more resources, hence (imagined) differences in economic and political climates have led to more individually realized projects; black Canadian students in post-secondary institutions generally receive a normalized education, one that has not yet assimilated or made provisions for "other" forms of cultural production; funding bodies maintain strict genre categories (somewhat due to "purist" filmmakers who lobby for and benefit from strict divisions) and do not encourage hybrid forms; Canadian left cultural critics and producers open to *developing* theories of representation are relatively small in



number — very few intellectuals, for historical and demographic reasons, produce outside of academic institutions, and there are even fewer numbers of blacks in this constituency.

Looking to Britain for exemplary models in post-colonialist cultural matters is both dangerous and ironic, when we consider how Britain has betrayed, in such an appalling fashion, the very peoples it has recently extended funding. And to ignore our own colonial past with Britain, with all of its contradictions, is simply unwise. The danger also lies in repeating past fetishizations: that things of note — depending on one's epistemological standpoint — happen elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Once theories are transplanted, taken out of their original context, a familiar pattern emerges; British (this time black) film production is placed as the dominant and Canadian production is relegated to a marginal, earlier, cruder, stage of development. Given the marginalized nature of these contributing determinants, this remains somewhat of a paradox. Homi Bhaba's assertion that "mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strate-

gies of colonial power and knowledge"<sup>9</sup> has bearing here. His claim that colonial mimicry remains "the desire for a reformed, recognizable, Other, as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (29) and that mimicry "is thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (29) makes the case of Canada more complex.

Until recently, race relations documentaries have been the most principal form of dominant black representations of race in this country. Two films stand as exemplary: Jennifer Hodge's *Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community* and Tahini Rached's *Haiti Quebec*. According, crudely, to the rubric of the British theorists, Kobena Mercer in particular, these films would be considered suspect, relegated to earlier, less sophisticated, and hence more problematic forms of representation. *Home Feeling* traces the effects of policing (the camera literally tracks the police officer's beat) on a targeted Toronto Black community. *Haiti Quebec* uncovers, through interviews, the reception of Haitians in Montreal,

and how Haitians cope with this daily response. Within the British taxonomy, these films are problematic on two fronts. First, the use of realism ties them into an institutionalized race relations discourse which has a marginalizing effect structurally, an effect which reinforces the otherness of the black subject. Second, they define blackness in relation to a white dominant. *Home Feeling*, by necessity, does not subvert these codes, but *Haiti Quebec*, by structuring the film around audio taped letters, interrupts these codes with a poetic variance on displacement. A disembodied voice emits from these mechanized missives, a voice from elsewhere, that works against the oppressive realities of Montreal's streets. Space restrictions prohibit an extended analysis of this film, but this example emphasizes the limitations of adopting a blueprint for correct cultural production, especially when Canadian black filmmaking is still in its nascent stage.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, as we have learned from the crippling cultural nationalism of the '70s (a practice still in evidence in most popular journalism on



Josette Simon and Janet Sears as the good black woman and the bad black woman of *Milk and Honey*.



Canadian film) a strictly laudatory discourse forestalls needed critique.

*Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community* and *Haiti Quebec* cannot be labelled great master works — by those who still endorse such fallacies as The (eurocentric) Great Tradition — nor can they be designated minor. They remain valuable documents. *Home Feeling: Struggle For A Community*, for example, chillingly anticipates the police killings of black youth in both Toronto and Montreal. Despite the limitations of these films, the realism, the representation of race “as a problem” sustained in relation to a monolithic white dominant, they nevertheless provide solid foundation for future, more innovative works that will (hopefully) examine the means of representation itself.

Kobena Mercer describes '70s race-related British films as depicting “criminalising stereotypes generated and amplified by media-fed moral panics.”<sup>11</sup> Fed by multi-culturalist hysteria, Canada is producing its “moral panics” in the '80s. Representations of black experience, as seen through the lenses of white folks, has surfaced in two recent feature films, *Sitting in Limbo* (NFB John Smith, 1986) and *Milk and Honey* (Rebecca Yates and Glen Saltzman, 1988) with all the anticipated problems in full view. *Sitting in Limbo*, although based on interviews with members from Montreal's teenage Caribbean community, through selectivity, represents only one facet of black teenage experience, the familiar stereotype: the pregnant black teenager and the lazy black boyfriend. Smith (with co-writer David Wilson), appropriates their stories and replaces them with a white-washed version, replete with a lecture. Relations between black teenagers, and their problems are not contextualized, and the film is literally structured as a moral fable: look what happens if you . . .

The rush to get to the “topic” first is understandable given market demands, (the film business, receiving cues from state versions of multiculturalism and more “hip” sources, is obviously cognizant of the fact that the “other is in”), but in the case of *Milk and Honey* this round should have been sat out. Josette Simon's convincing performance as a Jamaican nanny in Toronto awaiting her immigration papers was one of the few high points in a film that falls back on tired stereotypes. Replacing one ethnic group for another does not alter the clichéd cast of characters and situations: the good black woman versus the bad black woman, modern urban capital versus Jamaican “backwardness,” dan-

gerous black male sexuality versus white male, initially active, but eventual benign (read, paternalistic) sexuality. The opening and closing sequences of the film provide good examples. We open with a jam-packed cab ride through rural Jamaica replete with a wide-eyed minister (hints of Butterfly McQueen) and colourful dialogue — everything but the chickens cackling in the back seat. At the end we return to the filmmakers' primitive Eden with the reconstituted family beaming beatific smiles in a shroud of mountain mist. Interesting how a film whose story line invites gritty realism closes with such a loaded fantasy, and so dangerous a message — “who wants to stay in Canada anyway? Might as we go back home where I belong.” Sentiment and stereotype clearly dominate this film. A string of other excesses — a less than credible Christian fundamentalist meeting, the son's blood soaked shirts from beatings attributed to the black woman, disco music that accompanies a club owner wherever he goes — again clearly place *Milk and Honey* over the top.

The goal is not to replace bad old negative images with new good positive images. Work on stereotyping has outlined the danger in bringing evaluative criteria such as comparing characters in “real life” to discern the presence of stereotyping. The relation to ‘the real’ or an ‘ideal’ does not designate whether stereotyping is manifest, it is, however, as Steve Neale argues, repetition, repetition without difference, which underwrites the process.<sup>12</sup> Racism is not located within a text, it is determined by the discourses which surround it, its context. Overly formulaic scripts, coupled with familiar clichés, effect determinist narratives. In other words, the discourses which structure positive/negative representations of race must be eliminated.

Perhaps these projects appeared feasible and even enlightened on the desk of funding agencies, but realized, they illustrate the tendency towards totalizing white experience into universals. (As we have seen this practice is not necessarily a function of skin colour, what Gayatri Spivak has called “chromatism”). These two features offer but one illustration of how the effects of dominant structural relations (usually unwittingly) appropriate and thwart the very groups they (humanely) set out to explain in the first place. The continuance of ethnocentrism can only lead to stagnation (and worse) and the consequences of not responding to these complex representational challenges can

only result in further necessary contestation. □

## Notes

1. According to reports, the annual Grierson Documentary seminar was cancelled in 1988 due to “the intensity of the arguments” at the previous year's seminar: obviously a strain on the OFA's nerves, as well as their budget. See *Cinema Canada* (Nov. 1988): 49.
2. (Vancouver: Pulp Press) 1980.
3. “The Other is In: Black British Film in the US,” *Black Film British Cinema*, ICA document #7, BFI, 1988.
4. See “A Thoroughly Hidden Country: Resentment in Canadian Culture,” *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 12:1-2 (1988).
5. See, for example, Jim Pine's “The Cultural Context of Black British Cinema” and Kobena Mercer's “The Aesthetics of Black Independent Film in Britain” in *Blackframes*, Cambridge: MIT Press (1988). *Undercut* 17, an issue titled “Cultural Identities,” mentions the films in this context. The ICA Document #7 *Black Film British Cinema* analyses these new films as a cultural and political phenomena, as do various articles in *Screen* 29:4 (1988). For an analysis of these films in the context of third world cinema, see Kobena Mercer's “Third Cinema at Edinburgh,” *Screen* 27:34 (1986) and Clyde Taylor's “Edinburgh Festival 1986 — A Reply Eurocentrics vs. New Thought at Edinburgh,” *Framework* 34 (1987).
6. “Questions of Multi-Culturalism: Sneja Gunew and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Hecate*, 12 #1/2 (1986), 139-140.
7. This recent population was, of course, preceded by generations of Black Canadians.
8. Similar sentiments were stated in the context of feminist theory by myself six years ago. “. . . the prescriptive nature of the British critical apparatus in providing blueprints for “correct” cinematic production and analysis, made manifest my typically Canadian colonial mentality: I scanned the terrain and concluded that seminal work was being done (as always) elsewhere — in the motherland.” See “Revision: Reconsidering the British and Canadian Avant-Garde Cinemas” in *A Commonwealth*, The Funnel, Toronto, Canada, 1983. It is hoped that these recently elaborated models will not be digested as received ideas. Their use-value needs to be further contested and debated by critics and black practitioners.
9. See “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” in *October* 28 (1984): 126.
10. There could be resonances here of the debilitating after-effects of sanctified feminist film theory which adopted (wholesale) the critique of realism. This acceptance stultified the analysis of non-formally innovative films made by Canadian women, but also blocked the possibility of reconsidering theories (phenomenologically based) which could account for experience.
11. Kobena Mercer, “The Aesthetics of Black Independent Film in Britain” in *Blackframes* (52-53).
12. See “The Same Old Story: Stereotypes and Difference” in *Screen Education* 32/33 (1980): 33-37.



# ◀ dialectical interpretation ▶



the case of cinema direct  
and Pierre Perrault

*Un Pays Sans Bon Sens*



## by David Clandfield

"Here I should like to ask a favour of the reader of this book, and the audience of this film. Try to understand. Try to imagine yourself in someone else's place. In my place. Forget yourself . . .

Couldn't spectators forget that they are watching a film . . . those kinds of films that always prove them right . . . and consider this film simply as a reality observed? . . .

Actually, I'd like to show things as I see them. You can't help wondering whether our readings of this kind of cinema aren't distorted by excessive exposure to fiction. I should like to think that spectators could reach a reading that almost coincides with the filmmaker's reading of reality at the time of shooting. It would mean adopting the state of mind of someone else. An encounter. A privilege; one associated with hospitality and confidences, by which everybody would feel bound and responsible. As you do when respecting a confidence . . .

But what do we expect of people we see on a screen . . . other, that is, than that they should conform to our own world view, whether Biblical or Marxist-Leninist? For my part, I'd like the spectator to realize that the characters of this film don't belong to the screen, but to history, to the present, and that they are continuing to live their imperfect lives and that they cannot solve the problem of squaring the circle because they spent their life learning to build water-schooners 'by eye' instead of learning nuclear physics. They are their own justification and are not there to justify the spectator."

(Free translation from the annotated script of Pierre Perrault's *Un pays sans bon sens*, Montreal, Lidec, 1972, pp. 110-111; the film dates from 1970)

The above extract from the script of one of the classics of the 'living documentary' states clearly the hopes of *cinéma direct* filmmakers for a new generation and variety of viewers. Such viewers would suspend their own expectations, prejudices, ideological commitments and enter the social enclosure of the film's diegesis, just as the filmmaker had entered a specific community to shoot the film. In other words, the

experience of the viewer would strive to replicate that of the film-maker.

This hope of Perrault's needs some clarification.

First, it should be clearly distinguished from any belief or hope that a viewer could read reality through the film as though the filmic process itself were transparent. Perrault is asking for the viewer to approach his film with the same openness and receptiveness as Perrault claims for his own approach to the community that he incorporated into his film.

Secondly, Perrault is not claiming for himself the dispassionate, empirical status most often associated with the Candid-Eye and *cinéma-vérité* filmmakers of a certain English tradition at the National Film Board. The openness and receptiveness asked of the viewer is to accompany the fellow-feeling and solidarity that comes from hospitality and being taken into another's confidence. The real is not approached as a picturesque spectacle for outsiders, or with the wry smile of the detached observer.

Thirdly, Perrault insists that we understand the implications of the open frame implicit in the *cinéma direct* style. That is to say, we are called upon to understand that the people shown in his films are not fully represented but rather are schemata, detached by the film from a reality that we cannot know but that we believe is there. What is more, remembering that schematization and that broader, unknowable reality is a full-time responsibility for the viewer.

Fourthly, this realization necessarily entails for Perrault the viewer's suspension of judgement. The viewer, he contends, has no right to close a circle of understanding and moral consideration around the people whose images are briefly presented in this organized reading of the real. And this for two reasons. Such schemata are not the people whose traces they embody and consequently they cannot be judged as people are judged. Moreover, as untutored artisans rather than intellectuals, they cannot be held to represent or project the densely satisfying abstractions that are the stock-in-trade of the intellectuals that criticized the social formation of the world in Perrault's films.

This last remark brings us to a final point. The extract cited above is embedded in a long response by Perrault to those who evidently found the implicit identification of Québécois nationalism with Breton nationalism offensive or reactionary or who felt the film lost focus by retaining the barely

coherent grievances of a drunken ex-sailor in a Breton tavern that interrupted a conversation of the group being filmed.

So the ideal relationship between Perrault's film and its viewer should be suffused in the glow of confidentiality and hospitality, without prior judgement, without confusing the fragments for the whole reality and without expecting these chance moments of human life to provide solutions to problems uncovered along the way. The suspension of judgement could then lead to a new understanding, a new solidarity and, perhaps, a new alignment.

The model of Perrault's new reader recalls the Renoir actor in a famous demonstration film of Jean Renoir's approach to directing acting performance. His approach to one important, impassioned speech is to insist that the performer read the passage in its entirety without emotional expression and without the slightest variation in tone. The actor reads the speech over and over again, each time stimulating the frustration of the director whose ear still picks up elements of theatrical interpretation (she is a trained actor). At last, Renoir seems to be satisfied as the monotone is reached and then, little by little, a new tone grows in the successive readings until we feel that a new emotional commitment and expression is growing out of the actor's experience of the text itself, unencumbered by the histrionic baggage she brought with her. Perrault's perfect reader would perhaps interact with his film in the same way, surrendering to the processes and meanings of the other, temporarily abandoning the prior baggage of social and cultural habits and knowledge.

But does this reader, can this reader actually exist? And what are the characteristics of the texts that this reader is called upon to respond to in this way? This article is the latest in a sequence of papers and articles on the question of the reader of Perrault's work. Each one claimed to reach a workable model. In each case subsequent reflection led to the negation of the previous model and an attempt to formulate a new one.

Such a process could be described as a dialectics of interpretation. It is equally open to the criticism that it constitutes a sterile exercise. Militating against that view is the conviction that certain underlying questions are important for anyone interested in the social implication of film. For example, in what way can it be said that the *cinéma direct* style offers a different relationship between text and viewer from that of



other styles? Can that relationship be related to a social project and if so, how can such a social project be characterized? Is the *cinéma direct* style ideologically neutral in itself (at least relatively speaking), by which I mean do the ideological implications of such films derive from elements distinct from those that define style? And finally how can the Perrault project be introduced into this discussion?

My starting point in the analysis of Perrault's work lay *a priori* in the dual historical context from which they grew: Quebec's Quiet Revolution of the '50s and '60s and the rise of the *cinéma-vérité* movement in Western Europe and North America at that time. Their *cinéma direct* found ways of declaring solidarity with this modern, urban society. On the one hand, the roving eye of the ultra-light camera moved into the social setting with a self-conscious sense of purpose and freedom: it aligned itself frequently with other spectators and cameras found at the same events, and it did not track only the main event, frequently wandering off the ostensible focal point to find revealing or contrapuntal details in the background or to one side. On the other hand, their choice of subjects showed their reaction against the high culture associated with the conservative and clerical elites being swept aside by the social and political upheaval of the times: the films dwelt on the rituals of popular culture (parades, dances, spectator sports, recreational activities, and so on) and the ways in which the rhythms of everyday life were influenced by those of the industrial workplace (in mines, logging camps and mills). In all respects new forms of cultural behaviour were being acknowledged as distinct from the agrarian myths of the old fidelity. From these new behaviours a new kind of national identity would emerge, one built upon new technologies of power over nature (Hydro Quebec), new technologies of communication (film, television, etc.) and a new direction for education (child-centred, with a reduced role for the old commanding elites).

Perrault was to emerge from this tradition as one of its prime exponents, but from the outset important differences were evident. The improvisational, questing camera was clearly at work, with the exemplary work of Michel Brault and Bernard Gosselin at their best. The films dealt with the rituals and rhythms of everyday life and cultural expression clearly enough, too. Indeed there, too, the emphasis was more pronounced and self-conscious than in the

films of Perrault's contemporaries. But the reality that Perrault sought, lay in the rural hinterland of Quebec rather than the new urban society shown in the works of Jutra, Groulx, Carle, Fournier and company. It seemed as though Perrault was aligning himself with the old elites who had ferociously rejected the new urban realities as a basis for a sense of national identity. Was Perrault at odds with the new social project that his peers endorsed in a variety of ways?

One answer began to emerge from the study of Perrault's own annotated transcriptions of his early feature documentaries. They draw attention (through the use of versified formatting of the text) to the poetic quality that the film-maker ascribed to the speech of some of the working people that he filmed in his beloved rural communities. The poetry he found was not that of the elite tradition of high culture, but that of an oral culture that bypassed the control of distant elites and that was struggling to survive the incursions of cultural and economic forces that were threatening its extinction. This was an oral culture constantly re-defining itself by re-enacting time-honoured rituals of word and gesture, recalling its origins by reference to comparable communities in the 'old country.' By turning away from the urban (the new) and the official culture as expressed through theatre, literature and their analogues in film (the elitist or the alien), Perrault was seeking to align his films with a well-rooted, autochthonous, resistant, vibrant cultural strength out of which he believed a sense of national identity could be understood and realized by others in Quebec. By adding his films to these celebrations of identity through varied re-enactments of local ritual, Perrault was reinforcing and extending that communicative cycle to others. These other (Quebec) viewers could connect their behaviours and rituals to the films and find in them the basis for a distinct national resurgence and celebration.

This image of the film-maker's solidarity with a social project soon collapses under critical scrutiny. The mobile, interactive characteristics of the authentic, oral, people's culture that the films celebrate do not extend into the film's and the audience's experience of them. The events and accounts presented are uprooted from their original context, de-pragmatized to use a linguistic metaphor. They are subsequently fixed in inert celluloid and not subject to variation from 'performance' to 'performance.' The images have been captured by an alien technology (film) controlled

by a distant elite (the National Film Board). The cultural continuity model cannot extend to include filmic texts of this kind.

Can anything rescue the Perrault project from the imputation of failure, if not hypocrisy? This is the point at which the notion of the active viewer has to be reinserted with vigour. In other words, can a role for the viewer be found that could transcend the material barriers of textual inscription? Perrault himself has often insisted that this be the case. Phenomenological models of reception can be harnessed to this critical undertaking.

The process of schematization implied in any process of selection of detail (Perrault's documentaries have something like a 60:1 shooting ratio!) runs into the viewer's process of according meaning and value to those schemata by drawing on the repertoire of meanings and values proper to that viewer. It follows then that schematization and de-pragmatization render impossible any hope of reinstating the author's fuller understanding of reality in the viewer's consciousness. The viewer retains as such, a degree of freedom from the author's program. The viewer brings a background against which the viewing experience is sketched out as a foreground. Moreover, since the viewer consists in a living, changing consciousness, a partially pragmatic relationship is established between viewer and filmic text as that viewer engages in the varied processes of interpretation and evaluation.

To assess the degree of interpretative freedom allowed to the viewer, the characteristics of the communicative systems or codes used in a work have to be assessed. There are times in the experience of a work that one code or bundle of codes will detach itself from the others and occupy the viewer's attention while others recede in importance. The degree of schematization and the extent to which such codes are tied into closed semantic structures (arguments) provide a basis for estimating the level of inbuilt authorial control implied for the viewer.

With the aid of these two interpretative notions (schematization and the relative closure of codes), a tripartite model of *cinéma direct* films can be developed in which Perrault's works can be located as extreme cases:

(1) There is the relatively open, connotative system of images captured by the roving, questing camera, independently from the logic of principal events or conversations that they accompany in synchronisation; the viewer accepts



this system as open and connotative to the extent that the viewer believes in the lack of *mise-en-scène* implicit in the latent contract between *cinéma direct* filmmaker and viewer.

(2) There is the truncated system of 'characters' whose presence in the film is understood as partial, a schematization of a broader unknown reality (these people living their unfilmed lives). The fictional work may invite us to *imagine* such an off-screen reality; the *cinéma direct* engages us in the *belief* that the off-screen reality exists, and that we cannot understand these 'characters' either as we would their fictional counterparts or as we would if we knew them in real life.

(3) There is the closed system of codes of assembly, that consists in the stringing of images in sequence, the juxtaposition of images and sounds, and the use of intertitles that articulate linguistically an argument by which global meaning and rhetorical value are assigned to the component parts of the structured whole.

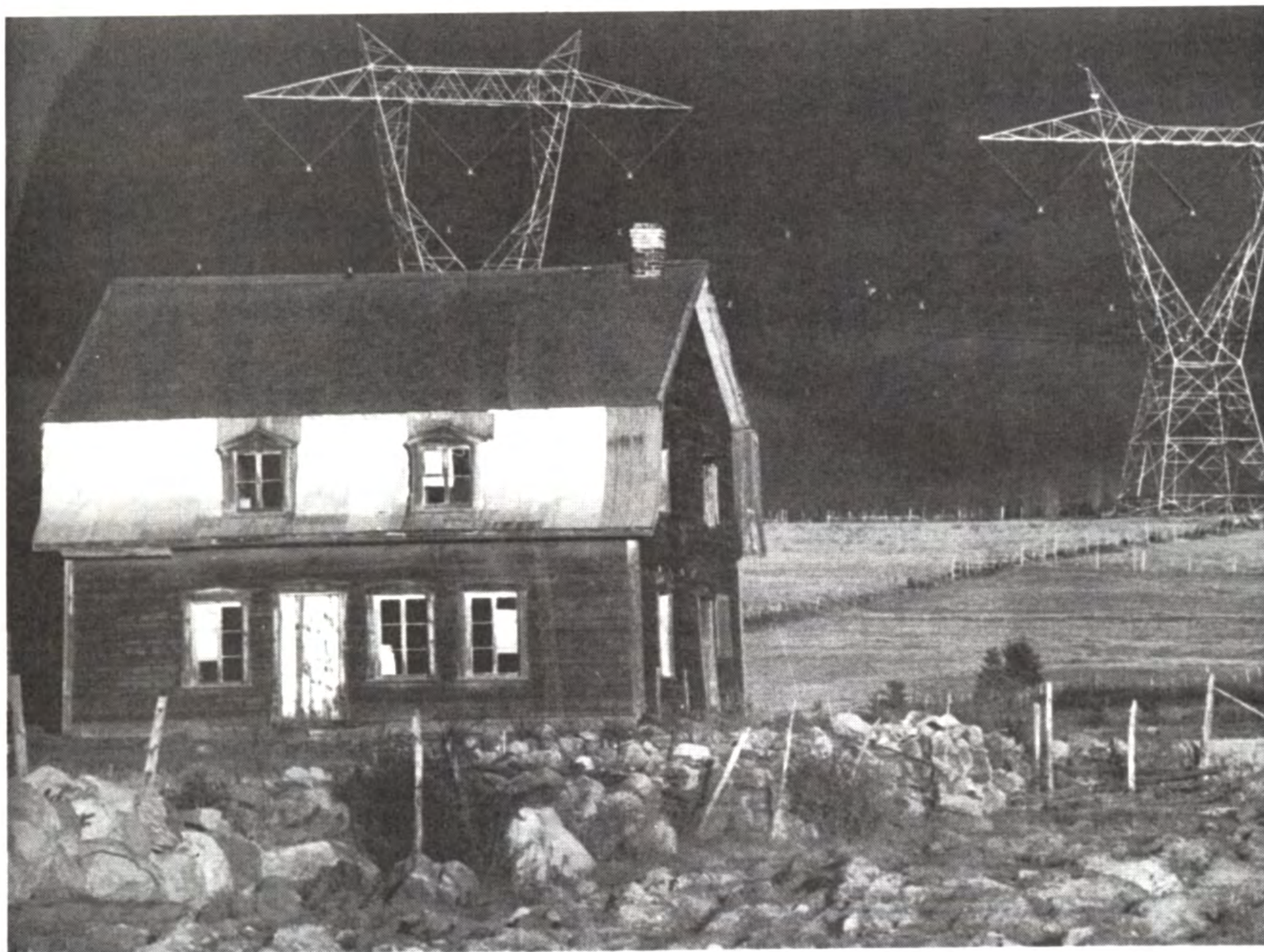
This defines a viewer then who vacillates between response to poetic, connotative images (1 above) and critical appraisal of rhetorical argument (3 above) as accretions to privileged extracts of a broader lived reality (2 above). Out of this web of the known and the unknown, the perceptible and the imperceptible, the on-screen and the off-screen, the controlled and the uncontrolled, a very different role for the viewer is forged from that of the viewer of fictional work, or avant-garde experimental work. The viewer is also different from that of the pre-scripted, didactic documentary of the British school of the '30s, or the quasi-empirical Candid-Eyes of the English-language Unit B at the National Film Board.

So where is the negation of this view of the freedom returned to the viewer of Perrault's *cinéma direct* works? The first answer lies in the transcriptions he has published of his films. These are more than memory aids for the reader seeking to recall the articulation of a viewing experience. In particular, *Un pays sans*

*bon sens* is almost an instruction manual for the interpreting viewer. Indeed, the instructions can be very explicit as the quotation from the head of this article has shown.

It could be argued that the book of the film is an irrelevance for the interpreting viewer of the film, serving to inject elements of authorial intention as privileged material even though the viewer has no obligation to accord any value to this evidence at all. Such a view conflates two different kinds of published film transcripts and overlooks features of the interpreting viewer's search for the controlling subject of the filmic text.

Books based on or 'drawn from' filmic texts may fall into two broad categories: paratextual transcripts and metatextual transcripts. Paratextual transcripts exist as marginal paraphernalia in the industrial and commercial processes of film production and exploitation; they include treatments, shooting-scripts, story-boards, shooting-diaries, novelized versions of



*Un Pays Sans Bon Sens*



the film, and so on. All acknowledge their support of the principal process that is directed towards the filmic text. Metatextual transcripts present the analysis of a finished text, ostensibly as aids for further study and analysis; they include discursive accounts, annotated and amended shooting-scripts, shot-by-shot analyses or even still-by-still photographic sequences. All imply an interpreting presence that has guided the analysis, and the scripts may even include explanatory material to dispel ambiguity or forestall objections. Pierre Perrault's transcript of *Un pays sans bon sens* is an extreme example of the latter.

The seriousness of the inclusion of the transcription in the interpretative process is revealed when we see how the range of systems proposed for the *cinéma direct* above is affected. They will be dealt with in reverse order:

(3) The closure of the codes of assembly is reinforced by explanation of the meanings the author accords to the words used in his intertitles, abstract summaries of the logical argument of each segment or chapter of the film, and a description of both the meaning and the affective value intended for particular effects of montage.

(2) An effort is made to bind the characters into a narrative that explains much more about their off-screen 'lives,'

telling us who they are, why they are where we see them and what they are referring to in some of their speeches that often seem both allusive and elusive. On the one hand, they are being fictionalised, given a story, a background, motivations, all the characteristics we associate with fictional narrative. On the other hand, they are being reprogrammatized; their level of schematization is being reduced by the increased amount of information provided about their off-screen life.

(1) The polysemy of the open, connotative system of images is also compromised by the insertion of explanatory notes that reveal the meanings the author accords to them and the ways in which these meanings are supposed to interact with those embedded in the dialogues or coded into the editorial argument.

So in all respects, the margin of interpretative liberty is severely limited by the incursion of the published transcript into the process. The controlling subject of all the processes is, after all, taken by viewer and reader to be one and the same. What we read in one (the transcript) thereby gains authority to control what we read 'into' the other (the film).

Perrault once said that he felt that the

true film is in the viewing: a phenomenological insight that accords with the notion of the active interpretant. But a reading of the transcript of *Un pays sans bon sens* adds a proviso. The true film is in the viewing, but only as long as the transcript is in the viewer.

The construct of the pragmatic viewer that had grown out of a phenomenological engagement with Perrault's works is now in danger of yielding to that of a programmed viewer. In such conditions, *cinéma direct* can offer an untrammelled engagement with traces of social reality only to the extent that the author has lost rather than surrendered control of its rhetorical envelope. At best publishing such a transcript is an effort to reclaim that which was lost. At worst it may aim to snatch back that which was accepted by the critical viewer and incorporated into systems of belief and knowledge that are alien to the original controlling subject. The complex processes of reception and critical interpretation are given a reduced role to play. The distant elite strikes again.

... or does it?

This negation of one construct of Perrault's implied reader may suggest a hostile dismissal of the project. But it must engender its own negation, too. And that is another story. □

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Richard Monette and Paule Baillargeon in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*.



# MERMAIDS: SINGING OFF KEY?

by Marlon Harrison

There are few films which attempt to portray women in a positive light and fewer still which actually succeed in doing so. Even a cursory look at the history of mainstream Hollywood film uncovers a trail of women depicted as prostitutes, mothers or little girls who are evil, ineffectual, passive, ignorant, silly, or are simply and curiously absent, as if that half of the world's population didn't exist.

*I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* is a film that has the look and feel of a feminist film: by feminist film I mean one which visualizes the issues, concerns and desires of women; challenges representations and expectations of images of women; and ultimately serves as a consciousness raising device for its viewers. Yet *Mermaids* only fools us into thinking it is a feminist film; attention to the filming technique, the narrative construction, the characterization and the treatment of voyeurism and sexuality all reveal that the so-called positive images of women in this film are undermined. In "Reclaiming the subject" (*Cinema Canada*, May 1988) George Godwin lays claim to a feminist, psychoanalytic reading of *Mermaids*.



Such a reading is quite justified in its own right, however, the psychoanalysis of *Mermaids* is not a likely interpretation with which the general film-going public would be familiar. The average viewer is more likely to leave the theatre with a more obvious analysis.

There are many clues that would lead viewers to a feminist reading of *Mermaids*: it is a very low budget film (\$350,000 compared to multi-millions for Hollywood films); it is written, produced and directed by women; the protagonist is a woman (Polly); there are two other major characters, both of whom are women (Gabrielle and Mary); these two supporting characters are lesbians and resume a lesbian relationship with each other within the film's narrative; Gabrielle is the curator of an art gallery in a large Canadian city, an unusual and risky business; the female characters are in no way glamorous; and there are two male characters who play very minor roles. With these factors in mind, the audience can reasonably expect *Mermaids* to be a feminist film or, at the very least, a film that will treat its subject and characters with some sensitivity.

The plot is a simple one. The film begins with the protagonist, Polly, landing a temporary clerical job in an art gallery. She immediately becomes infatuated with Gabrielle, the gallery owner. Laughably inept as a secretary, Polly is nevertheless more than adept with a camera, as she peddles her bike through sections of Toronto, photographing people and buildings. She develops the black and white film in the bathroom-cum-darkroom of her tiny slum apartment. The darkroom also seems to be the place where Polly drifts off into fantasyland, as three dream sequences (at three different times during the film) flow out of darkroom/photographic associations. Polly lives alone and engages in no social life other than a Japanese dinner and a birthday party, both at Gabrielle's invitation. At the party, Polly steals a piece of Gabrielle's artwork, thereby throwing into motion a series of events leading to the disclosure of Mary, Gabrielle's lesbian lover, as the real artist.

## VIDEO KIDS

**T**echnical presentation is a crucial and integral element to the theme of the film. From the beginning, *Mermaids* stands out as technically unusual. In the first shot, Polly appears in the lower right hand corner of a video screen, with the video camera (and thus the audience) looking down on her. The screen is slightly out of focus and the colours are not vibrant; Polly takes up only half the screen and behind her, a collage of photographs covers the wall. By placing the camera at a specific angle and distancing the viewer from Polly with two cameras (film and video), the filmmaker situates the perspective of both the audience and the protagonist. In terms of the video recordings, Polly, as video-maker, places herself in a position where the audience looks down on her; she faces the camera and is aware that there is an audience — she even smiles at us in the final shot of the film as she turns the video camera off. The video device is used throughout the story in order to provide information and further develop the narrative. Yet, along with distancing Polly from the audience (via the two cameras), it creates a sense of Polly's distant awareness of herself, and of life in general.

It is important to realize that Polly is the first person narrator and as such she provides a version of a story which is her version only: she presents her interpretation of events which describe a period of her life. The narrative follows a linear structure, with the narrator interjecting at certain points

within the story to comment and supply necessary information. On the level of the film, there is a dichotomy between the past of the events and the present of the narration. With such a narrative structure, it is possible for the narrator to reflect upon past events; she has the freedom and power as narrator to create new metaphors and images for her dreams, fantasies and fears, linking these to a new understanding of herself. But, is her version of the story truthful? Does she reflect critically on the events she narrates?

For Polly, videotaping her story is like keeping a diary, the autobiographical mode of expression which is traditionally associated with women. This personal mode is, in turn, closely associated with documentary cinema, a form which has a strong tradition in Canada. In addition, it was the first and most visible way women broke into independent filmmaking in the early '70s. Through the use of video and 16mm film, *Mermaids* captures the look of a documentary: authenticity and reality. Documentaries focus closely on the life and identity of a specific person, causing the viewer to assume that the film subject has an independent existence apart from the film. In *Mermaids*, the audience is encouraged to believe it is seeing something *real*, something *true*.

## PARROTS CAN'T SWIM

**P**olly's character development is the major contributing factor to the unsatisfactory image of women in the film. Her character is revealed through two techniques: the past self as depicted on-screen; and the present self, as the narrator on video. In past and present, she is depicted as honest, simple and possessing fragile self-confidence. Her moments of self-reflection, occurring only through Polly the video narrator (including voice-over), amount to her deciding that she couldn't talk to boys because they didn't understand her; and that "love is a pretty strong word when you are talking about another woman and she is not your mother."

Her image is trite and offensive to women. Polly is the name given to a parrot, a bird which mimicks. Polly imitates Gabrielle's language in an attempt to be like her; and, in the dream sequences, she mimicks Superman/girl (flying), Spiderman (climbing), and Jesus (walking on water). Parrots eat crackers, as Polly does in two scenes: when watching Gabrielle and Mary on the security video display; and in her apartment. In both scenes, the crackers crumble and bits fly from her mouth: parrots are funny, and so is Polly. Her character also imitates the cute dumb broad stereotype: red hair unkempt, wide-eyed expressions and silly grins (remember Goldie Hawn?). Polly rides a girl's bike (complete with wicker basket and tinkling bell), and dresses in school-girl sweaters and skirts with knee socks and loafers; in the dream sequences she wears old-fashioned frilly long dresses with parasols and granny boots reminiscent of Mary Poppins. Her past life is dismissed in a few minutes: she is 31 years old, her parents died 10 years ago and she has lived alone ever since. Her life seems blinkered, unfulfilled. She has no particular interests other than photography for her own amusement: she takes photographs of people, none of whom are a part of her life, and of buildings, which represent a sterile, heartless society in which she is uncomfortable and inept.

As Polly's character appears immature, those of Gabrielle and Mary are also under-developed. Gabrielle appears to be much older (by perhaps as much as 15 years) than Polly and Mary, who seem much closer in age. Gabrielle is confident, serious and strong-willed, while Mary is a much gentler person, non-judgemental yet determined. Their pasts are dealt



with in snippets: Polly explains (in voice-over) that Gabrielle inherited money from her parents who owned a chocolate factory (!) and thus she could afford to open the Gallery. She further discovers that Gabrielle travelled widely and met many famous writers and artists; and, via the security video, Polly learns that Gabrielle and Mary were once lovers.

There is very little three-way communication between the women. Feeble efforts at dialogue between Polly and Gabrielle, Polly and Mary, and Mary and Gabrielle create little sympathy for these women. Gabrielle is set up in the film as a role model for Polly, yet there is little for us or Polly to admire about her; in fact, she seems to be a symbol of male intellect and power, running a business and interacting with men on their own terms, using their language. Her worldly self-assurance is in direct contrast to Polly's endearing klutziness. Gabrielle does not encourage confidence and spirit in the audience; that she does so temporarily for Polly, only heightens our awareness of how feeble and pathetic Polly is. There are no complexities developed, no contradictions to examine; the female protagonists are there simply to be admired but with no reasons given as to why they should be.

### SEX AND THE SINGLE MERMAID

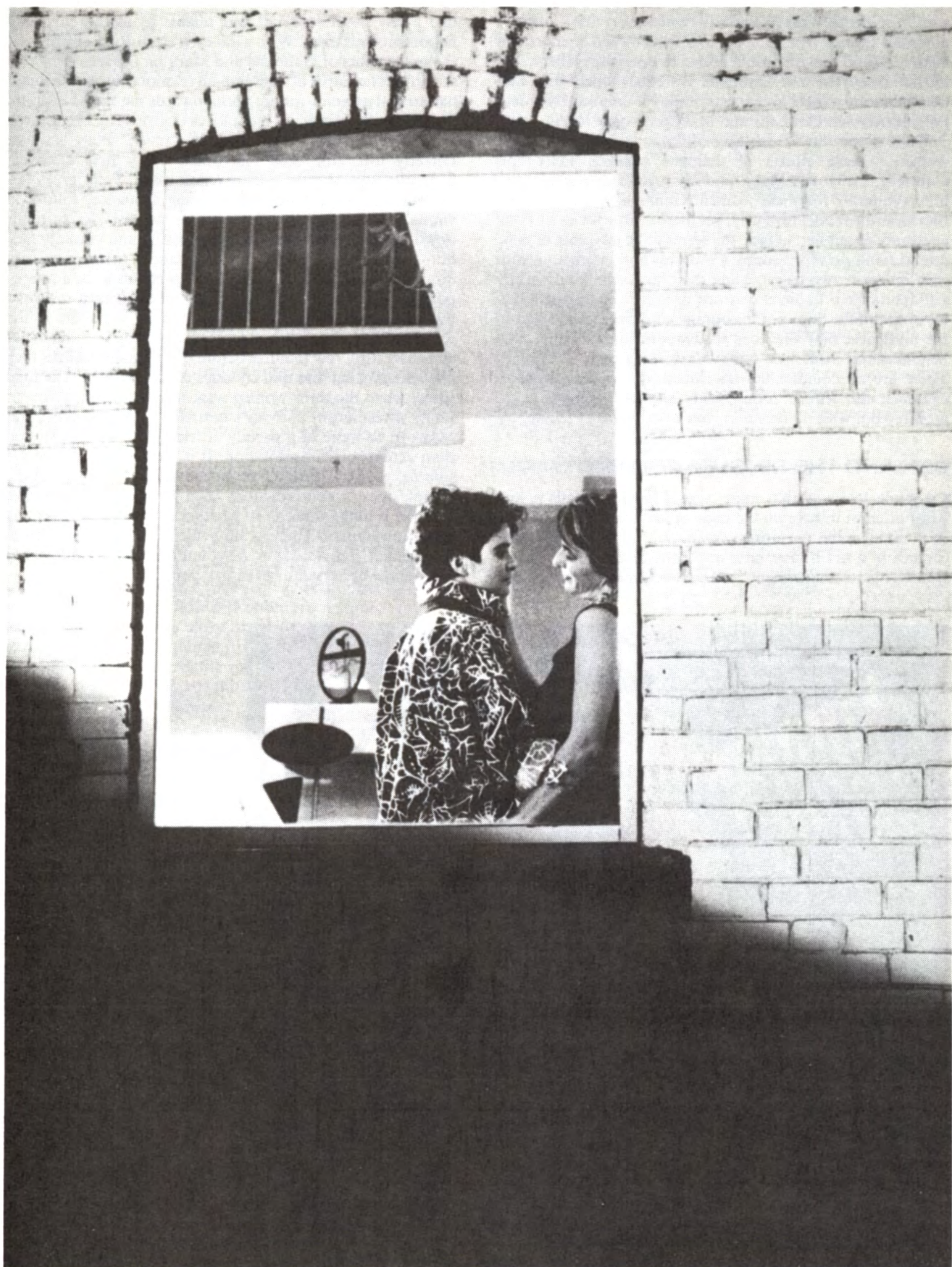
**W**hile *Mermaids* has many sexual images, it fails in any attempt to take on the issue of sexuality. The audience follows the narrative explanation of Polly's sexuality (or lack of it as I'll show later on). Polly describes herself as a spinster, yet acknowledges a timid adolescent sexuality: she

had a few boyfriends but was unable to discuss anything important with them. With wide-eyed curiosity, Polly follows the movements of Gabrielle and Mary on the security video screen, as she learns of their lesbian relationship. Yet 'lesbian' has no real meaning for her until, towards the end of the film, Polly actually *asks* Mary if she loves Gabrielle as a mother or a friend; when Mary responds, "as a lover," Polly is silent. Directly after the scene in which Polly first discovers Gabrielle and Mary's lesbian relationship, Polly takes her camera and, in a long and amusing sequence, follows a young heterosexual couple into the woods: she surreptitiously takes photographs of them kissing and virtually falls out of a tree when she tries to get a shot of them embracing on the grass. In another scene, Polly pretends to be a model, posing in various ridiculous stances in front of a mirrored building, her face and body fractured by the splits in the square panels; the audience sees two men stop and watch her curiously for a few minutes before Polly finally realizes they are watching her and quickly rides off on her bike. The final scene, when the three women walk into the forest, seems to imply a resolution of Polly's sexuality. Yet the conclusion seems to be more of a parody of 'riding off into the sunset' than actual conflict resolution. It is, perhaps, a case of the filmmaker not knowing how to end the movie. None of the complexities or contradictions have yet been addressed and the film is ambiguous as to whether Polly ever reaches any sexual awareness. There is no evidence that Polly, a once-fragmented individual, is now unified and secure in her knowledge of herself or even has discovered a path to those



Sheila McCarthy as Polly — learning to 'look.'





**Mary (Ann-Marie MacDonald) and Gabrielle (Paule Baillargeon) providing the gloss of lesbian life.**



ends. The development of love between Polly and Gabrielle is never fully addressed to begin with, and remains completely unresolved in the end. Polly has tried to create a mother/daughter bond in order to deal with her love for Gabrielle; but her efforts are unsuccessful because they have been totally constructed by herself and not shared by Gabrielle. Again, through the use of the video camera and the act of taking photographs, Polly distances herself from sex. Her sexual curiosity is piqued but there is never any sense of sexuality per se. Polly never actually learns anything except, perhaps, to *look*.

If Polly is seen as 'coming of age,' that is, as a girl verging on womanhood, does she actually come to terms with either male or lesbian sexuality (in the context of the film) in order to forge a new identity as an adult woman? The film is silent on this question. Polly is not an adolescent girl nor even a young woman in her early twenties. She is a woman of 31, an age by which one would expect a woman to have already come of age. Hence, Polly discovers her sexuality rather late in life. In her dress and timid attitude, Polly seems sexless and any awareness of her sex is absent. Polly is depicted as the good girl: innocent, charmingly naive, honest, and simple — the traditional virgin in traditional cinema, representing traditional society. Polly is a child who idealizes and emulates Gabrielle and is totally unconcerned about her own sexuality. Mary's character can be seen to represent the sexually alive young adult who is not afraid of her own lust; Gabrielle is the maternal 'postgenital' woman who has successfully negotiated her sexuality and is able to take the consequences of her action. Hetero-, bi- and homosexual issues aside, the threesome walking off 'into the sunset' in the last scene fails to transform the daughter/mother/grandmother triad into sexually well-adjusted women.

The depiction of lesbian sexuality in *Mermaids* is glossed over and totally gratuitous; it is there to hold the audience's interest. As lesbians, Gabrielle and Mary traditionally will be seen by the audience as whores, reinforcing the stereotype of the evil lesbian or, at least, of the bad girl. They often dress in black leather, again reinforcing yet another symbol of the bad girl. There is an ever-present expectation, from the viewer's standpoint, that the lesbian theme will either blossom or explode, providing the film with traditional sexual conflict. The relationship between Gabrielle and Mary is merely titillating, providing the *look* of lesbian life but glossing over how that life feels and what it means to lesbians (compare the treatment of lesbian sexuality in *Liana*, *Personal Best* and *Desert Hearts*). The film fails to comment or even hint at the social pressures that act on lesbians, nor does it confront any lesbian issues. The contradictions and pleasures inherent in lesbian life are entirely absent. Is this a utopian vision of some future acceptance of lesbian sexuality? There is nothing in the film which can support such a premise. While the fact that no resolution of lesbian issues is sought is perhaps a blessing, the ending of *Mermaids* — going off into the sunset — is a mere fantasy.

## HOME SWEET HOMELY

**D**oes the film provide Polly with any alternatives in the realm of work, sex, marriage or motherhood? She is seen completely outside the family; other than the very brief reference to her deceased parents, there is no mention of any other family or friends. In a long sequence in which Polly is alone in her apartment listening to music, cooking and eating dinner, we get a pathetic look into her home life, made all the more cruel by the way it's treated with amusement. (Com-



Waiting for the lesbian theme to blossom or explode . . .



pare, for example, the treatment of Macabea's squalid home life in Suzana Amaral's *Hour of the Star*.) There are dirty dishes piled in the sink; the fridge is empty; she drinks milk directly from the milk container; a cat wanders about on the table and the kitchen counters; the apartment is in general disarray; Polly sniffs the leftovers in a tin and then uses them in her cooking. She lives in a slum neighbourhood and lives a stereotypical *male* bachelor lifestyle which reveals her inability to take care of herself. There is no one to take care of Polly, no one who even cares. Gabrielle, the one person who *might* care, is painfully patronizing and disrespectful. Polly has no social life outside work except for two occasions, the dinner and the birthday party, at which she is laughably inept. Polly is completely distanced and isolated from the social world, relating to it solely through taking pictures and eavesdropping.

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## PLAYING PEEK-A-BOO

The structure of point of view, that is, the *look*, is central to filmic identification. A very disturbing aspect of *Mermaids* is its explicit theme of voyeurism. In all forms of art which depict women, the spectator is invited to look: women are placed in the traditional exhibitionist role (of male fantasy) where they are simultaneously looked at and displayed. Thus placed — in a manner which suggests that the woman is there of her own free will — the spectator is absolved from any guilt of voyeurism. The processes of filming and photography are important elements in *Mermaids*. Polly invades private worlds by watching and looking, either directly or through a lens, objectifying these worlds in the process. The audience also looks and scrutinizes, through the video camera, through Polly's camera, and through the film itself. Disturbingly, Polly is a spy; she is an obsessive voyeur whose looking becomes a perversion. Because of her innocent and bumbling nature, her voyeurism is laughable. Nevertheless, the film doesn't play with and comment upon the camera's voyeuristic properties; it describes woman's look as being as intrusive, objectifying and aggressive as the male look. Polly, therefore, must be seen to complement the authority of the male look. In the cinema, there is always the possibility of shifting the emphasis of the look by varying and exposing it. However, in *Mermaids*, women are still the objects of the camera.

## A FISH WITHOUT WATER

Positive aspects of the film cannot be denied. Polly succeeds in bringing her photographic art out into the open; by making it public, she sets herself up for criticism, a brave act for someone so deficient in self-esteem. Many opportunities were made available for Polly to display her abilities: by revealing her art through photography and through her musical sensibility; by being a simple, caring person; and by asserting her belief and trust in Gabrielle. These truly positive images could have been further enhanced but the filmmaker tends to give with one hand while taking away with the other: Polly's positive attributes are undercut by her ignorance and pathos and the ridicule in which these are presented. While the women characters are presented in unusual circumstances and unusual roles, their limitations tend to reinforce preexisting stereotypes. Any issues raised in the film (and specifically sexuality and voyeurism) are undercut by the very lack of comment on them.

There are too many subtle messages in *Mermaids* which counteract its otherwise redeeming qualities. Polly wants to fit in, to be thought competent, yet in the end she remains alienated from her sexuality, the social world around her and the process of achieving identity. Resolution of these is implied but ambiguous. While the film addresses the female spectator, it does not provide a new sense of identification with women or display a corresponding commitment to communicate with the audience and stir them to a higher level of awareness.

In the final analysis, *I've Heard The Mermaids Singing* falls into the mainstream cinematic pretense of portraying women sympathetically while subtle negative aspects of the three female characters belie any attempts to develop positive images. Critical analysis of filming techniques and narrative construction uncovers that a feminist reading of the film would be misguided. Explicit voyeurism and glossing over crucial issues of sexuality misrepresent women's efforts today to break away from social stereotypes and male-defined roles. □



# MELANCHOLIA and the Banal


by Denis Bellemare

translated by Wendy Waring

[*"La Mélancolie et le banal"* appears in its original French version in *Dérives* #52, 1986]

A child has died. This statement ties together two filmic extremes in the history of Québécois cinema: Jean-Yves Bigras' *La petite Aurore l'enfant martyre* (1951) and Claude Jutra's *La dame en couleurs* (1985). By creating an open tension out of death, out of indicators of loss, they burrow into a more secret theoretical territory where the concepts of melancholia and the banal are lodged and elaborated. Thus the manifest commingles with a latent trajectory in a fluid and temporal knowledge of our corpus. It is necessary to carve an initial passage through this series of mourning, abandonist and orphaned fictions in order to catch a glimpse of an increasingly tightly knit network; one turned away from systems of loss that simulate death the better to protect itself from it.

In this return to the films of the '50s, one notion is explored in depth so







Claude Jutra's *La Dame en Couleurs*.

as to foreground its pertinence and its discrete ramifications in recent Québécois cinema. Little Aurore has lost her mother and must live with a step-mother who overpowers and kills her, literally, sadistically. This period of 're-living,' in order to die for real this time and not in an imaginary world, is revealed in all its importance through the lingering image of the dead mother, through an identification with the loved and lost object.

In *La dame en couleurs* (1985), Sébastien, a child who is completely normal, lives in a psychiatric hospital which is providing shelter for a number of abandoned children during that period in the '40s when orphanages are overburdened. Inside of two days he dies of diphtheria.

This syndrome of abandon — death's abyss, the doubling of a loss in morbid sites and situations — represents the prototype of orphan-cinema in the years 1942-53. (On this first period of commercial Québécois cinema, see: Christiane Tremblay Daviault, *Un cinéma orphelin* Montreal, Quebec/Amerique, 1981). Further on we will discuss the ways in which Jutra's film follows this pattern and how it demarcates itself from it formally and symbolically. This syndrome in which anguish, aggression and a lack of self-esteem overlap, represents a phase which comes prior to a critical moral stage. Given the violence and innocence of the psychic stakes in the films of this period, one can still detect a discomfort, a modesty, the sense of a trace revealing a certain pregnancy of said affects.

This anterior phase makes most sense not as a condition for all preceding cinematographic experimentation but as an embarrassing heritage whose goods, of no present worth, are found layered in oblivion. This abandonist stage — trans-

formed, displaced, diverted — will increasingly pull out of its orbit around a primitive, infantile, monstrous id to circle a superego which is strong, tough and severe.

In *La Névrose d'abandon* (Paris, PUF, 1950), Guermaine Guex distinguishes two types of abandonists, one negative-aggressive and the other positive-supportive. If Aurore's masochism — which calls forth so excessively the necessarily complementary sadism of her step-mother — never ceases to amaze us, the gentle, childlike virtues of *Père Chopin* (1943) and the mummifying solicitude of the *Curé du Village* (1949) lay claim, through an unconscious restraint, to an aggressiveness which is just as strong. Aurore displays tendencies which are "flagrantly masochistic, linked to a need to test something out [*faire l'épreuve*] in order to bear it out [*pour faire preuve*]" (in the case of our interpretation of the film *La petite Aurore, l'enfant martyre*, Marie Louise's crime, the murder of Delphine, Aurore's mother, and Aurore's suicidal desire to renew it would be tested out.) In this instance, the subject is defined through the terms of the test that s/he has made others take." (Guex, *op. cit.*, p. 24) This diegetic failure about a desire for vengeance completely turned against the self is resolved, but curiously, also manages to succeed through the subject's death for the object, the dead mother. The young orphaned girl in *Curé du village*, through her devotion and servitude to others, through the care she takes to avoid all discord or opposition, displays an entire assortment of "secret masochistic manifestations. In general these are the symptoms of a deep-rooted self-destructiveness, linked to feelings of worthlessness." (*Ibid*, p. 25)

An abandonist mentality as subject matter brings together various periods in Québécois cinema through a number of



different modes and registers. The children of the Saint-Arsène orphanage in *On est loin du soleil* (1970) by Jacques Leduc; Maria, the mute girl in *La mort d'un bucheron* (1973) and *La vraie nature de Bernadette* (1972) by Gilles Carle; Benoit and his companion Carmen as well as the orphans in the psychiatric hospital in *Mon oncle Antoine* (1971) and *La dame en couleurs*: all aim, through their forms of abandonment, to restore the object of lost love.

André Forcier's films: *Le retour de l'Immaculée Conception* (1967-1971), *Bar Salon* (1973), *L'eau chaude, l'eau froide* (1976), *Au clair de la lune* (1982), are based on this abandonment while adding a primary hostility to its deepest structures. André Roy comments on this in his article: "Du prolétaire à E.T." (*Copie zéro*, 19, 1984, p. 23):

Forcier's films describe a no man's land: a territory where a pathetic and marginal humanity must wade ostracized and outside the law. Children of misery, left to themselves, unbalanced vagabonds, the petty paranoid riff-raff, depressive women, whores, all form a people without a future, haggard, silenced by aggressiveness and resentment. In place of love, hate becomes the only sign of life. For Forcier's characters, the strength of evil is pathological, massive. It shuts them out.

Forcier marks an exception and an *écriture* within Québécois cinema; he doesn't steer clear of sameness as subject matter, nor of the mourner's, the abandonist's or the orphan's repetition compulsion. Not only does he not depart from it, he exacerbates this return of the repressed. This anteriority, visible in Forcier's work, must be emphasized, not in order to establish an absolute reading or a deterministic consistency but to pipe a treacherous breeze under calm diegetic surfaces. Perhaps with this new *mise en relief*, a first cut can be taken from this immutable reality. If the transformation that has taken place in the forms of content and expression in Québécois films is what we find intriguing, we must hesitate in giving them an absolute autonomy, in detaching their current spontaneity from a certain history of Québécois cinema. This introduction shows what a number of theoretical texts have already discerned, and it is the substance which they express, and what they express, that I want at once to call upon and to distance myself from.

Let us return to the imaginary and theoretical line drawn between the two poles: *La petite Aurore l'enfant martyre* and *La dame en couleurs*. This line circumscribes a space in which melancholia and the banal oscillate, where they are echoed without really being named. From regression's sadistic return of the self in *La petite Aurore* to the idealization and sublimation of an identificatory love object forever lost in *La dame en couleurs*, is begun an ambivalent conflict in which Québécois cinema holds fast to the straps between the signified and signifier in the name of a real, a space of the real.

Whereas in *La Petite Aurore* the real and the imaginary blend together through reciprocal inclusion in the primitive arena of fantasy, in *La dame en couleurs* real and imaginary are kept separate, exchanging and calling out desperately to the space of dreams. Where the contents of *La petite Aurore* take on the signified of death in its entirety by invoking closure on the signifier, a significant paradigmatic displacement has serious consequences for the signifier in *La dame en couleurs*. Art in Jutra, through that constant exchange carried out by the mad painter of the lady in colours with the children, superimposes, overlaps in disturbing fashion, renders equivocal: childhood and death.

Little Aurore's corpse is returned to the law in this descriptive, exhaustive coroner's report:

Fifty-four wounds to the body, the cranium nearly deformed by the severity of the blows. Internal organs are dried out, burned by the ingestion of cleaning solutions.

Bodies, stranded in *Mon oncle Antoine*, stolen in *La dame en couleurs*, are not full of stories of prodigal sons or corpses, but rather of exquisite cadavers returning to loving arms.

With art, one starts off with fascination . . . That fascination produced by the uncanny strangeness of art is the same as that which the corpse provokes. This double of the living which resembles us so perfectly as to be confused with us while nonetheless not being us. (Sarah Kofman, *Mélancolie dans l'art*, Paris, Galilée, 1985, p. 18).

## MELANCHOLIA

Melancholia revives the figures of the void, of loss, of abandon, repressed somewhere in an imaginary which is repudiated and silenced, blocked by the banal, by the literal. The melancholic signifier is rendered neutral by the banal speaker. If traditional narrative was the great diegetic occupation, then Québécois filmic narrative would be full of self-reproach for deserting it. Not only would there be a double duty here but as well, a duel, one a shuddering in the face of the real, and the other a flattening of the imaginary by the real.

The concept of melancholia, rich in meaning, needs to be marked out. While it touches on mourning, depression and abandon, it is none of these. We are caught up in a system of tangents which allows us to redefine the outer limit of their common points the better to free up their distinct areas.

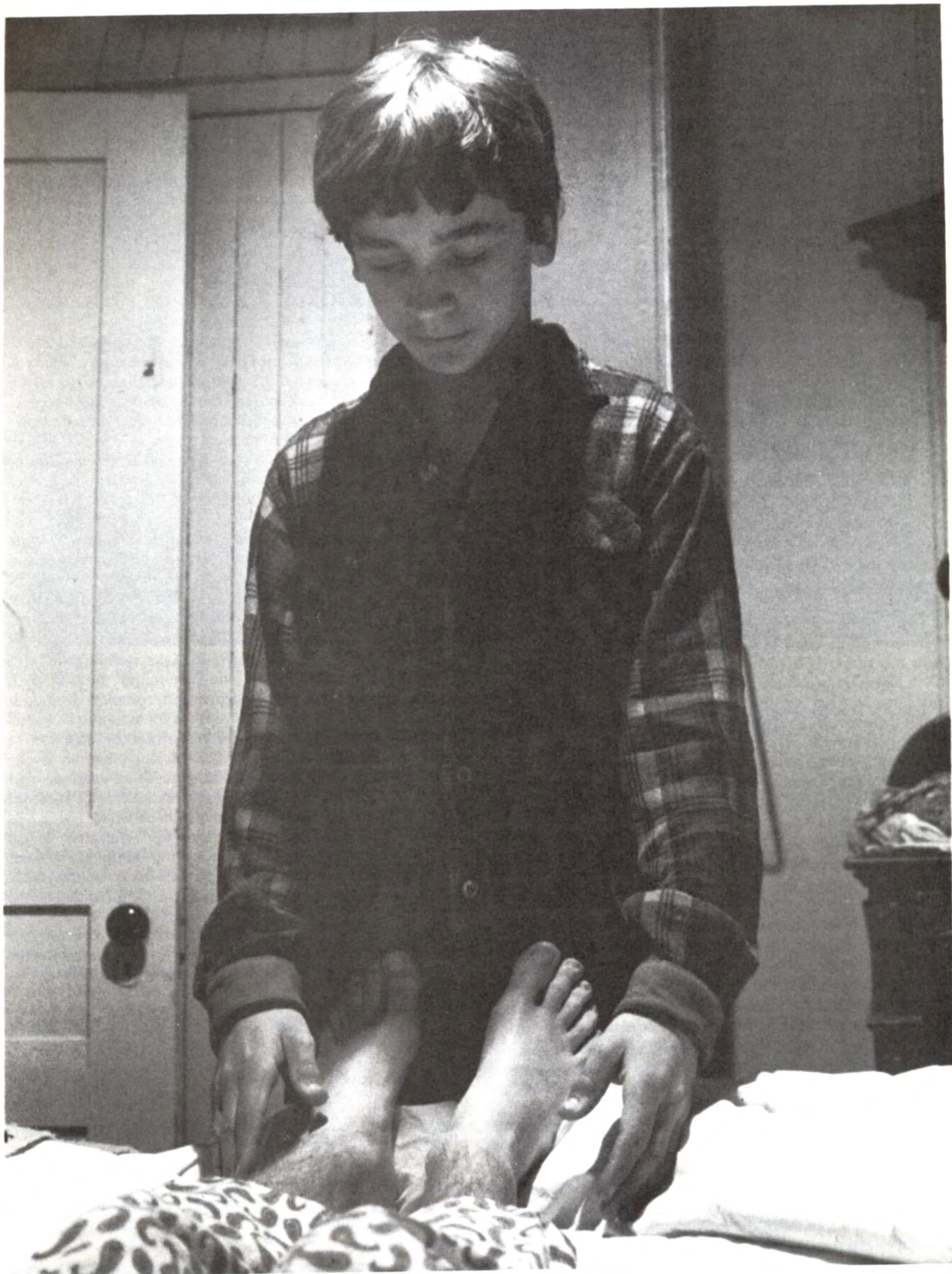
In "Mourning and Melancholia" (*Standard Edition*, London, Hogarth, 1957, XIV), Freud links melancholia with mourning and sketches out the first major traits of their similarities: a deeply painful depression, complete disinterest in the outside world, abstinence from all activity. The chief similarity is this reaction to the loss of a loved object or of some abstraction put in its place. Melancholic loss is one already seeking out the particular traits of an enigma; what was lost slips out of consciousness. Melancholia's troubled link bears on the demonstrative affects of what it hides, its difficult feelings of self-esteem, the impoverishment of the ego, a delirium of pettiness. If mourning is branded by what is evident and visible of loss, a depression over impossible death, melancholia planes the edges of the driftings of the impossible ego. The dynamics of melancholia are played out and lose themselves in this identification of the ego with the abandoned object. The loss of the ego is substituted for the loss of the object in an overlay that is not deceitful but conflicting.

In light of these dynamics, the melancholic topic can be clearly investigated. The anti-reproaches in the delirium of pettiness, that seizure of truth by a lively insightfulness confirms this cleavage of the ego and the superego, that crucial critical moral stage. And at the end of these Freudian sentences, beyond the principal road of mourning, making the melancholic process stand out, springs forth narcissism.

In *L'Angoisse. Problématiques I* (Paris, PUF, 1980), Laplanche reviews the heterogeneity of melancholia's affects. Narcissistic neurosis, at the hinge of neurosis and psychosis, is given new fullness when placed in the context of two texts by Freud.

The text *Mourning and melancholia* (1917) in particular, is inseparable from another text which appeared in 1914, *On narcissism: An introduction*. Straight off, two points are of





**Claude Jutra's *Mon Oncle Antoine*.**



interest in narcissism. On the one hand, the introduction of the moment of the ideal and of the superego, and on the other, a reflection on the notion of object, of the choice of object. (Laplanche, *op. cit.*, p. 304).

Laplanche's reading of these two texts prompts laborious and dynamic interpretation. It permits a fertile contact between cinema and psychoanalysis, a passageway between melancholia and film. With this testing out of the link to the object, the kind of work indispensable to textual analysis begins. The "preoccupation with some other object" (Laplanche), the "acting in absence" (Fédida) rallies all the energy necessary not for expressing that link, but for silencing it.

Inhibition is not, therefore, a purely negative phenomenon, but means rather that the subject is busy somewhere else. If he is not investing himself, if he seems, as they say, depressed, if he withdraws into himself, it's not for no reason, it's in order to do some other thing. (*Ibid.*, p. 311)

The internal sphere of immobility is admirably produced in Jacques Leduc's film *Tendresse ordinaire* (1973). The film's diegesis furnishes all the basic elements necessary to melancholic induction. The heavy paralysis of the narrative under cover of the dedramatization and the banality of daily life, introduces the chief character, Esther, whose vitality is gradually ebbing away. If mourning's work is to "kill death," melancholia's is to kill time. With every gesture the subject's ego banishes itself, retires from all activity in order to be revived only by or for the disappeared object. Nothing preoccupies Esther so much as the thought of her absent husband and the anticipation of his return. This disinterest in the outside world pushes her to refuse to tolerate the presence of her companion, Luce. Looking at herself in such a pitiful position from outside only makes her withdraw from the world even further.

The workings of this film translate the imperceptible weight of inhibition into a radical return of the expressive cinematographic propositions of the first and of the last shot — delineating between these two poles a filmic space, in total suspension, awaiting meaning. The first shot of *Tendresse ordinaire*, a short static view of Esther's face outside in the winter night as she mutters, "Dammit it's cold, and dark too," finds its contrast (somewhat of an answer) in the last shot which is long (2'6") in terms of overall effect and movement. Esther moves about, rushes up to her room, comes back into frame and puts on colourful summer clothes. She opens the door of her balcony, and looks out at the river. It is night, yet suddenly light breaks forth.

This light delivers her from the present, and projects her into the past. In an absolute negation of the real, Esther can finally teeter in the total banishment of the ego, aspire with ebullience to absence on the same level as Jocelyn. Henceforth our characters become, on each of their immaterial riverbanks, two immobile figures watching death pass. "And immobility makes of the body a lover devoted henceforth to absence." (Fédida, *L'Absence*, Paris, Gallimard, 1978, p. 74)

Poised precariously in the imaginary, perception now gives way to an unconscious process of projection. The result is a spatial organization which is linked to the specular space where the subject takes hold of itself as an other, and where the other is the image of the self: a world of the metamorphosis of sameness (Sami-Ali, *Corps reel, corps imaginaire*, Paris, Dunod, 1977, p. 83).

In order to get to the last shot of the subject's identification

with the lost object, in order to resist the feverish debate about the ego, the film's temporality was rigidly constructed around the lure of continuity and simultaneity. We will see how these resistances to the imaginary, these privations of the projective function necessitate the intervention of the concept of the banal. Leduc's films, exhausted by their evacuation of meaning, only let their guard down in the final scenes, and then, cut adrift from their moorings, they give themselves over to a true mourning. Moreover, these final scenes reach no conclusion, they find their reconciliation in loss. In *On est loin du soleil* (1970), each character comes to incorporate some of the partial realities of the deceased Brother André, and the entirety of the filmic body finds its resolution in the burial of the principal character.

What informs these profoundly inhibited bodies completely traversed by sites of absence; what works on them in their choice of narcissistic object; where does the conflict come from? And what is really at issue in this ambivalence linked to the choice of object? What is the basis of this tug-of-war between a stubborn rigidity and a fragility born of the link with the object? This pulling movement generates a biased discourse. It does not succeed in articulating its real object, or at best does so by opposites. Its vehement complaint distances it increasingly from the other and is understood through its monotony. To return to our melancholic topic at the point where the ego and superego confront one another, narcissism projects itself, produces itself, in that ideal moment of the split ego. To end up here, it must undergo a certain process of repression in the field of the ego's self-esteem.

The recognition of this ideal image of the ego links and contrasts the different identificatory moments of the subject; its requirements fatally dictate the scenarios of the debates with the ego. For our purposes, it isn't a matter of the ideal ego taken to the full extent of its omnipotence, nor of sublimation knowing how to attain its other-goal without repression, but rather of this vital confrontation with the ego's ideal.

The ego's ideal appears like something which would place itself before the ego as its ideal; in one sense a moment less illusory than the moment of the ideal ego, and certainly more related to problems of the law and ethics (Laplanche, *op. cit.*, p. 307).

The superego beats back its listening, censoring apparatus. A critical, moral consciousness is added to the melancholic's heightened perception of reality and refines the observational delirium. Ever vigilant, it tests the ego's ideals and projects, in its perception of the real, its worse side. This psychic apparatus is of interest all the more because it carries attributes particular to the cinema, the eye and the voice. Is not this desire to observe, this acute perception of the real extended through a certain kind of cinema, protracted in a quasi McLuhanesque sense?

This is thus a moment of observation. A moment which broadcasts its descriptions with a critical nuance. A moment which measures the effectiveness of the subject's performances against its ideal; it thus functions in tandem with the ideal like a guardian. (Laplanche, *op. cit.*, p. 308)

This accusatory identification leads the melancholic in his/her narcissistic regression to introject the bad ego. "The lost object is a failed object" writes Laplanche. The hate/love ambivalence is inscribed, nestles inside the superego's very contradiction. Aggressiveness, destruction, guilt, feed on its severity. The ideal moment pays for this moral consciousness



through its renunciation of drives, the strength of its self-denials.

Melanie Klein opens a precocious passageway for the superego where the subject's own destructive drives are introjected. But what part of the id pushes the superego to these death drives? A third text by Freud on the instinctual dualism of life and death, *Beyond the pleasure principle* (1920), and a book by André Green, *Narcissisme de vie, narcissisme de mort* (1983), will make this clearer for us as we delve deeper into this infernal trio of death, narcissism and melancholia. Laplanche leaves us with an archaic seizure, hybrid of the ravaging superego.

Julia Kristeva, in her seminar at Paris VII (December 1985-June 1986) on the imaginary and melancholia, situates the psychoanalytic problematic on a semiotic level. Following Lacan, the notion of thing, a pre-object anterior to it, interrogates the real as inaccessible and from this is born anguish: the real rebels. Our itinerary from the loss of the object to the loss of the ego leads here to the impasse of a loss of meaning, to signifier as semblance. The signifier loses its vitality, empties itself contradictorily enmeshed in its own excess of meaning. Fernand Bélanger's film *De la tourbe et du restant* (1979) elaborates precisely this simulated symbolic construction. Ambivalent, its associative montage does not succeed in giving order to the turf's excess of meaning and loses itself in the asymbolism of the leftover, a leftover of sense.

With this rich vegetable matter, this turf, the film systematically contrasts production with destruction, nutrition with poisoning, fertilization with devastation, nutrition with poisoning, fertilization with devastation. This frenetic exchange of energies is cancelled out through gains and losses (one being respectively the inverse of the other) and attains a degree zero of signification at the crossroads of life and death. By disrupting sequentiality, the film sketches out a regressive paradigm of fake events, of fake semblances which repulse the primary material of the signifier. Slowly slithering on this moving real, the film evokes the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and closes with a reference to hallucination.

Fédida attempts to disengage the Freudian association of mourning and melancholia in order to open it up to the circulation of other investments. In doing so, he also opens up the imaginary pathways of dreams. Even before its loss, the object's charm is the source of melancholic forms. The depressive relationship with the beautiful object throws them off balance. From these new hypotheses, we might take up Fédida's invitation to look into what the phenomenologists have to say (Binswanger, Tatossian, Minkowski, Straus, von Gebattel) about the self, the void, the space of subjectivity, the temporality of the depressed.

This capacity for creation, this vitality of fantasmatic reaction in the melancholic is so much the more interesting because the banal reaches into its very centre. It will beat back its entire apparatus to repress the fervour within, tying down imaginary movement with a static indifference.

Melancholia is less the regressive reaction to the loss of the object than hallucination's fantasmatic capacity for keeping it alive as a lost object (Fédida, *L'absence*, Paris, Minuit, 1978, p. 65).

## THE BANAL

**W**e can now narrow down the number of investments at play in the melancholic process. Nonetheless, we must theoretically hold off measuring the "self-restraint" set in place by the Québécois films mentioned; for

their own expressions are never seen through to the end. Another force manages to neutralize them, and if it does not cancel them out, it levels out their possible emergences. The banal, a force of inertia, so sustains repression that one wonders if this is not a particular response that the melancholic ego has adopted to rid itself of excess destructive energy. It forms a smooth and rigid shield against which subjects, actions and affects rebound to be read as people, facts and gestures conceived in their eventful reality. The banal oversees the narrative economy of the melancholic expression, altering the signifier in order to block the projection of its own process. Its discourse attempts to conceal this melancholia, but in thinking to exclude it, the banal includes it unknowingly. The banal must be understood in terms of projection, in terms of its own absence. Sami-Ali links it to that "uncanny strangeness" where perception and projection make the real and the imaginary coincide. (See *De la projection, une étude psychanalytique*, Paris, Payot, 1970).

In reaction to this derealization, the banal puts a threefold emphasis on reality, perception and the familiar in order to pry them from their links with the imaginary, projection and the uncanny; thus denying their fundamentals and origins. This bifurcation maintains, to a still greater degree, the cleavage of the ego and the superego that is brought about in melancholia. It withdraws from the dynamic function of projection which might have to put an end to this intrapsychic conflict by "following a trajectory running from the loss of the real to its restoration." For this failure to acknowledge the real which so preoccupies projection, is filled in by the imaginary.

The banal borrows another form of sensibility, it provides a supplement to the interpretative activity: the rational, the objective, the true. Its agenda has nothing to do with what's imaginary, it spends all its energy articulating the primacy of external perception in order to efface internal processes.

The banal speaker does not use metaphor or metonymy, but another language constructed in the mode of projection or its absence: the figurative or the literal. The literal articulates reality's triumph in its absolute transparency without latent content to entrap it. Produced from the code of "hard fact," nothing can be added to the real of the banal. Any qualifier makes it precarious, any particularity causes its repudiation in a treacherous dialectical reversal. There is nothing more general than the particular, nothing more common than the typical. Flattening out all extremes, it displays the economy of its colour: neutral.

But what must be understood by the real is the banal, which is neutral on the level of affects, literal in its relation to content, the particular in general in its relation to form. (Sami-Ali, *Le banal*, Paris, Gallimard, 1980, p. 79)

Projection measures itself against the identity of internal and external perceptions, against the polarity of inside and outside. The banal knows little of this imaginary circuit; it is distributed exclusively on the external's descriptive axis. This perceived exterior also makes its claim to being as whole and autonomous, as spatially here, as its verifiable, tangible immediately present real. A certain relationship with an aesthetic of transparency in cinema, with *cinéma vérité* and with *cinéma direct* should come as no surprise.

The formula that expresses this ( $A = A$ ) is the very fact of what remains identical to itself. Nothing of this definitive transparency would be able to resist thought in the least. The banal being is an absolute appearance: it is immediately affected but never overwhelmed. It is simply, to be or not to be. (Ibid., p. 24)



This identity equation activates the eternal circle of the repetition compulsion. The uncanny strangeness of our projective introduction is blocked by the familiarity of perception. The movement consists in slipping as close as possible to the surface of the real, to display it in its very evidence, while narrowing the space between its reproduction and its manifestations. It's a matter of building the pathway of the literal, of taking a sample of all the singularities which as a whole make up the scheme of the social context. This method of covering a territory, to deliver it as such in its irremediable appearance, brings us back to our corpus. Québécois cinema, in its persevering and obsessive vitality for measuring, for cataloguing its images joins up somewhere with the banal's obsessive urge for the real in its relation to the descriptive, the reproducible. By ensuring its hold over the factual and the actual, this desire to inscribe oneself in the real in order to construct it, also precludes its other possibilities.

No doubt the pathology of the banal is equally creative from a formal point of view, but these functional forms are the captives of social practice and go beyond the real only to fall back again into the real. (*Ibid.*, p. 78)

Denys Arcand's *Gina* delves deep into the sensible forms of the banal. Arcand has continually tracked down that site where the real stumbles. He does not question the perversion of inscription, he works it over. He returns reality to itself — creating circuits of increasing complexity, he disentangles reality from figuration and restores it to an irreducible reading. Sami-Ali establishes four principal categories of the banal: the banal is first the literal; it is then confounded with the typical; an image of the image, it reflects a model with which it will strive to conform; the banal is, finally, the geometrical.

*The banal is first the literal.* In *Gina* the filmmaker shoots in two formats, in 35mm colour and in 16mm black and white. This frequently used device has instituted two false cinematographic horizons — documentary and fiction — and simplified their pseudocorollaries, the real and the imaginary. Arcand uses them here to contrary ends in order to corner that inevitable flight of one toward the other. Twin mechanisms of reproduction, they support one another, relay to one another, reinforce one another in revealing what is. This *mise en abyme* of the film in a film, of the documentary in fiction and vice versa returns to reproduction again and again, managing to empty it of its indisputable self-evidence. Workers, filmmakers, a dancer, snowmobilers, a hotel and a factory, *the banal is confounded with the typical*. The characters become functions of a game already played out. Even while allowing particular characteristics to develop with a certain sensitivity, the characteristic to develop with a certain sensitivity, the characters are rooted in a social landscape that is easily recognized, quickly earmarked and mapped out. "The typical appears then as the symbolic equivalent of visually magnified objects" (*Ibid.* p. 50).

One scene in the film completes this aesthetic of the banal. It recapitulates the entire film with its dualities and converges on a reality of what is the same. Gina, the striptease dancer, and Dolores, the worker, end up together in a hotel washroom. They are getting made up, one for work, the other for a night out. The symmetry of the fixed frame puts all the furthest corners of the shot into movement: left, right, front, back — these differences are levelled out. We see Gina and Dolores standing back to us and yet they face us in the mirror's reflection. *Image dans l'image*, *Gina* (the film) is inscribed on the surface of the body of representation by splitting it into an imaginary, fantasized body of the dancer

and a documented, real body of the worker. But by reworking their image in the mirror, this scene redistributes that opposition through the exchange of a new real for Gina and a renewal of the imaginary for Dolores. This splitting and this redistribution cancel out the reality and the virtuality of the image, and return them to themselves in that very space of specularity that is the exploited body.

These interlocking structures multiply in a number of various figures: the levelling of the 35mm and 16mm formats, the reversibility of the real and the virtual in the make-up scene. This *geometry of what is the same and what is interchangeable* finds perfect symmetry in the actantial schema of the characters. Three duos (the producer and Dolores, the cameraman and Gina, the assistant and the hotel manager) initiate relationships which are then barred at the end of the diegetic chain by three third persons (Dolores' fiancé, Gina's pimp, the innkeeper's husband). This *pas de deux* in triple teeter, is a trilogy of the ridiculous where, from three successive conclusions, the flight toward a possible imaginary seems an even greater imprisonment. Dolores marries and plans to quit her job at the textile factory; Gina takes a trip to Mexico and leaves far behind the winter of her suffering and vengeance; the producer, instead of finishing his all-too perceptive documentary, produces a melodrama. Arcand has transformed "the melancholia of impotence into a mocking pleasantry" (M.C. Labotte, *Esthétique de la mélancolie*, Paris Aubier, 1984).

By maintaining this intransigent position on the exterior to produce an even greater proportion of the real, the banal's extreme tension forces the emergence of an other object. Having come finally to the end of its proclaimed self-sufficiency, the banal allows the suspicion of a lack to take form. We are intrigued, so polished is its surface. In other words, the banal is a lure.

The banal then calls us to examine what cannot be reduced to what is the same, that which defines unconscious thought — the thought of the impossible adequacy of the self to the self, of the doubling of content into manifest and latent, of the invisible presence of condensation and displacement. Now if nothing matches up with what is, the duality of being and appearance is ultimate. The banal itself is a lure to the extent that it is invariably present to replace something else. (Sami-Ali, *Le banal*, op. cit., p. 10)

## MELANCHOLIA AND THE BANAL

The first step in our initial hypothesis suggested that the banal rested over the laborious process of melancholia like a rigid shawl. We were caught somewhat unaware by the repudiation in its construction of a real so blinding, that only now do we realize that in their narrow relation lies an even more delicate movement. The banal can overlap with certain melancholic forms to then divert them from their lost object. This equivocal relationship enables us to see that melancholia emerges only by virtue of this *cache* and their meetings in a particular aesthetic territory. Theoretically, one is not the other; practically, one is never without the other in our textual analysis of Québécois films. This "not with you, not without you" is proper to the very ambivalence of melancholia, but also to the lure of the banal. This degree zero of the banal speaker which feigns nothingness and this silence of the melancholic in the night, are they not fascinating in their prudish action and speech?

The banal finds its way through the work only through a projective process that is so much the more effective in



that it disappears behind the real that it patches together. Rather than being an additional sign, the extreme objectivity of the banal links up with the most complete subjectivity. (Sam-Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 53)

Melancholia and the banal have a number of things in common: an exhaustion of emotional content that can be seen in their repetition and monotony, a considerable drop in energy level, an inhibition in all affect. And in the well-trodden path of the ambivalent conflict and its inverse figures, they often double each other negatively. The absence of projection of one boosts that projection of absence in the other, the one belonging strictly to the outside turns away from the other living within. Melancholic ambivalence metamorphosises into a banal equivalence. And the topical cleavage of melancholia reactivates itself with gusto in its cleavage with the banal.

But only textual analysis allows us to grasp clearly the aesthetic of a cinema cleaving melancholia and the banal. For there where the space of representation is one with the spatiality of the body, form and content put their dialectic complementaries in relation.

On the level of the image, what means of expression do melancholia and the banal offer? Absence is the overflow for a site that cannot be named, traversed, where the banal distances figurability. It creates a surface on which time stretches outward rather than one in which action gets underway. Unlike Hitchcock's aesthetic of vertigo, it produces a gaping horizontally where the melancholic gaze strays. The too-close, too-far translates the same "unemployment." The

frame, its lighting, its fixedness, its duration compose this narcissistic organization of the void.

On the discursive level, how does the film construct its temporality? What condensations and displacements are lurking under sequentiality and the literal's lure of continuity? Is the real a simulacrum for death? How does the work of melancholia and the banal circulate under cover of repetition and inversion? All the workings of these films remain to be explored, to be pursued in depth; theory expects, as does the reader, not only that it be tested out to be born out, but as well, that more subtle articulations of the dynamic border between theory and practice be made.

And as a powerful manifestation of Québécois cinema, *cinéma direct* finds its place in the slot of melancholia and the banal. It meets up with a number of its essential articulations. Its historical leap in energy responds to a dynamic counter-investment originating in melancholia. Like mania, it replaces somewhat the static barrier of loss with a dynamic barrier. It offers a mirror blinded by its own belief in being able to reveal. In its symbolizing impossibility, it does not manage to fill the void, to escape lack; it often activates it. It is condemned to confuse a repressed imaginary for a perceived real.

Cinema direct doubles both melancholia and the banal at the level of its apparatus. The critical moment, the observation of the superego, rallies documentary cinema to perfect hearing and recording of the real. The apparatus becomes an observing body. It watches over, it ceaselessly observes the f/actual ego in all objectivity, exteriority, thanks to this literal, reproductive mechanism of the real. Perception claims



Lea Pool's *La Femme de l'hotel*.



itself as true without projection. A manifest avowal of content inaugurates the latent repudiation of form.

We can liken this research to a series of concentric circles cut through and braced by a line of history. The circle of an aesthetic of melancholia and the banal bends gracefully, stretches lithely and folds itself into various positions in the films of Leduc, Arcand, Forcier, and into various tangents where the banal lets up its guard on melancholic expression, as in the films of Jutra, Pool, Mankiewicz. These last films do not differ greatly from the outline I have drawn here; rather they can be read at the crossroad of a single current, ready to take a turn even more backward than one might believe. *Les beaux souvenirs* (1981), *Les bons débarras* (1979) by Francis Mankiewicz, *Au clair de la lune* (1982) by André Forcier, *Jacques et Novembre* (1984) by Jean Beaudry and Francois Bouvier, *La femme de l'hotel* (1984), *Anne Trister* (1986) by Léa Pool, *La dame en couleurs* (1985) by Claude Jutra seem to be a re-opening of lack, of gaping, providing access to the symbolic in their desire for fiction and projection.

My study underlies a genesis of the real and the imaginary where the process of symbolization, through the gradual emergence of the body, is difficult to achieve. The filmic body becomes an entity of representation and gets a projective process of narration underway. In this interpretative field, the Québécois filmic body has seen three phases. The *blocked body* of cinema from the years 1942-53 organizes the space of its fantasy like a plane ruled by reciprocal inclusions. Its unsutured filmic space focusses with great difficulty a series of temporalities, lacking as it does, a voice to pull together the narrative body. It corresponds to our abandonist, orphaned and mourning fiction. The *ordinary body* inhabits the circle of melancholia and the banal. It covers a vast ensemble from 1958 to the present, from *cinéma direct*, documentary, to all the films of sociological motivation. This wide angle cinema searches for a realist identificatory framework where the individual is a distinct social body in a complex figuration of territoriality. And hidden beneath this veneer of the real, it has certainly produced the most original form of cinematographic sensibility in Québécois cinema. *Albédo* (1982) by Jacques Leduc and *Sonatine* by Micheline Lanctôt surely represent the pinnacle of this aesthetic of melancholia and the banal. It has the quality of cinema in the making. We can name two of its precursors, Gilles Groulx and Claude Jutra. Perhaps the '80s will prefigure it.



*Jacques et Novembre*

And here again, it is not a matter so much of boxing films into some set diagnosis nor of concluding with a mythic semiotic of signifying depths. As with melancholia and the banal, it is resistances and surfaces that must be worked through. After their exchanges, psychoanalysis "beyond the city" and cinema "beyond the frame" will never be the same, nor entirely different. At the same time, alternatively, there must emerge the differently said, differently heard, differently seen differently perceived.

The visual image, not yet visible, still unseen, represents a moment of language, the inscription of objects. This moment of figurability, caught in the act of secret action, keeps us busy because it keeps quiet. □

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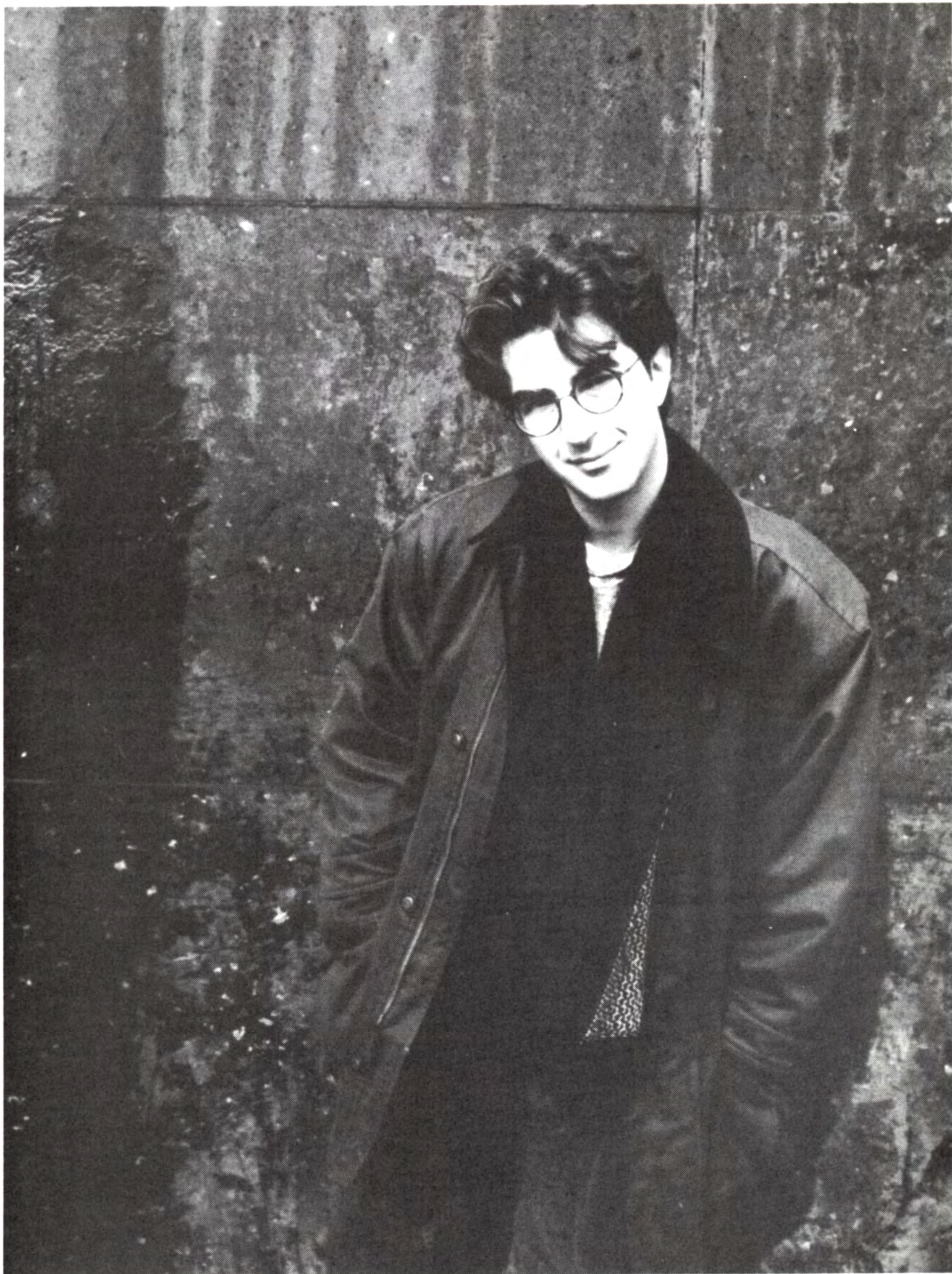
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**Atom Egoyan**



# ATOM EGOYAN:

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## an interview

by Ron Burnett

Born in Egypt of Armenian parents, director Atom Egoyan has been resident in Canada since the age of three. He describes his film career as schizophrenic, dividing his activities between his own work, and directing Canadian shot episodes for American television series such as *Hitchcock Presents* and *The Twilight Zone*. According to Egoyan, shooting for television means having the lowest expectation of the audience . . . however with *Family Viewing*, audience expectations are high . . . "I want people to be suspicious."



[Reprinted with permission from Film Views 137, Spring 1988]

**RON BURNETT:** Atom, could you describe how you got to make *Family Viewing*?

**ATOM EGOYAN:** I was in a very odd situation with *Family Viewing* because I had made a first feature, *Next of Kin*, totally outside of any system, inasmuch as it was made for \$35,000, and it received a moderate amount of attention. When I was planning *Family Viewing*, the Ontario Film Development Corporation came into existence. I wasn't originally intending to go to Telefilm or the OFDC but it happened that they were using my first feature, *Next of Kin*, as an example of the type of work they wanted to support, and I thought at that point I would be a fool not to take advantage of the situation. Because of the formal considerations in *Family Viewing*, I had no desire to make it into a higher budget picture. I was in a weird position. I had to marginalize myself to make sure I had total control over the project and that

meant, for instance, not going to Telefilm and not pursuing investors whom I knew would not support the way I wanted to make the film. I think the OFDC understood that when they said, "Look, we can give you more money than you're asking for, and the only thing we would suggest is that a lot of the stuff you want to shoot on video, you *should* shoot on video *and* film just in case the video doesn't work." It was that sort of spirit which I suppose I felt could have undermined the whole approach to the production. I think that's a problem with Toronto to a degree, inasmuch as you have funding organizations which try to mirror the ways in which an American funding organization would work. The whole attitude with a lot of American organizations is that you delay the process of filming until the last possible moment. In the case of a film like *Family Viewing* it is all about the opposite, about taking certain types of risks and seeing



whether or not you can succeed.

**RB:** *Why did you choose to work in video? Was it for aesthetic reasons?*

**AE:** Oh yes. I think that's one of the problems with low-budget films. People see a different type of language being employed and they often assume that it is a result of economic circumstances, in other words, that the film-maker didn't really have a choice. That has been very frustrating for me, because of the way we used video in the film, so it was an aesthetic decision. It was very important that it be done in such a way that it be executed with absolute conviction. If I had done it both ways, if I was trying to cover myself in case it didn't work, then it would have been to no purpose. I mean, if you are directing actors to do one thing and then directing them to do something else entirely because the one thing you wanted them to do may not work, then you are just shattering their confidence in the project.

**RB:** *Could you define more precisely where you see yourself in relation to mainstream cinema? I ask this because your home, Toronto, has become the Hollywood of the North.*

**AE:** I make my living doing freelance directing for North American television shot in Toronto, series like *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *Twilight Zone* and so forth. It is not as though that process of production holds any mystery for me, I know exactly what it involves and I know that the predominant concern in shooting one of those things is production values — or as they would say, seeing it all up there on the screen. That's a very odd notion because it involves seeing money up there on the screen — if something cost \$5 million to make, they want to see that \$5 million up there. And of course, the whole thing with independent cinema is that what you want to see up there on the screen is a certain spirit, and the whole process of their type of production (and I'm making gross generalizations when I say "their," I'm referring to that in a very archetypal sort of way), is that you camouflage that whole process of seeing a spirit by seeing a lot of other things which are very seductive in a very superficial sort of way. So, I suppose because I have a familiarity with that sort of production, I know exactly what I'm reacting against when I'm doing my own films. It's not as though I'm working in some sort of vacuum, I do know exactly what my options are and it is a creative choice to go one way or the other.

**RB:** *To elaborate on that, how did you get into commercial film-making?*

**AE:** That's a very odd story. When I finished my first feature, *Next of Kin*, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation had a series called *For The Record* — which was a series of shows on social issues in the form of one-hour dramas. They were looking for new Canadian talent at that time, so I ended up doing one called *In This Quarter*, which was quite an interesting script dealing with an IRA terrorist who got involved with an Irish-Canadian boxer. This particular episode involved a lot of action, and action is something that I very rarely choreograph in my own work — in fact in some ways they are anti-action in terms of the way they are presented — but all of a sudden I had the opportunity to choreograph action. Once I finished that show I had created something which caught the eye of a lot of the commercial productions that were being made in Toronto. Right now my career is totally schizophrenic, because when an American production like *Hitchcock Presents* asks to see my work I would never dream of showing them my independent films. Ironically, I now have another body of work which conforms more to their idea of what film is about. So as I said, in my case it's very schizophrenic. My exposure to mainstream

forms of production has taught me what I am up against and actually clarified for me where I'd like to go.

**RB:** *Moving on then, what made you decide to make a film about the family?*

**AE:** I think that if you look at the themes that are presented in the film, some are inherently social, and I think that any film which deals with the family is dealing with the smallest social unit in our society — and in a sense it is a question of scope: when you're working with a smaller budget I suppose one of the things that has to be in your mind when you are writing is that you have to keep the characters down to a minimum; you have to be able to deploy the themes that you want to address with a minimum of means, otherwise you aren't going to be able to get it made. So I suppose I had these concerns but I really felt that I had to keep my scope very, very concentrated. So working on the themes I was interested in, through the context of a particular family, was a very economical way of dealing with a lot of the issues I was concerned with. Also I think it is a great starting point because you are able to deal with the central archetypes in our society. They can be reduced to Father Figure, Mother Figure, Figure of the Child, the Figure of one generation against another generation. That ties in so neatly with the generational textures I was trying to use in *Family Viewing*, you know, different generations of video image, film stock, and so on. So, at a certain point, it all came together and it was quite intuitive — you plot it to a certain extent but at a certain point it finds its own momentum and you just lose yourself in the process.

**RB:** *I'd like to take that notion of intuition a bit further because, when one works in mainstream (it's a bad word but, for the purposes of the discussion . . .) film, obviously it is the intuitive side of the process which is the most difficult to maintain because of the pre-planning that goes into the production. How do you deal with that? To me, it is not only a matter of overcoming a whole production infrastructure that tends to push you more and more, because there are so many people involved in it, towards an over-determined process, where the flash of insight you might get when two characters are suddenly interacting in a manner that is different from what you imagined, well, that flash of insight just doesn't have a space to develop.*

**AE:** I suppose it's important to keep that conflict in mind when you are planning the film. As a producer, I think one of the most important decisions you make is not necessarily the material you are working on but the production apparatus that you choose to develop the project with, and that determines what funding organizations you go to, it determines so many factors. With *Family Viewing*, I think the film is about control; it's about how people exercise control over others but, on the other hand, I wanted to make sure that the environment of the shooting itself was not that controlled, and the way to go about that of course was to work with as small a crew as possible.

**RB:** *Did you improvise?*

**AE:** No, we improvised a lot during rehearsals and there are certain key moments in the film which were improvised, but they were improvised not in terms of the actors but in terms of the design of the film, the choreography of the various shots. Especially, once we were in the studio, we realized we were getting certain effects through the shooting of the dramatic scenes on video, shooting off a screen and then getting wave patterns and stuff like that. But in terms of the drama itself, it's very precise, it is a very stylized reality, so there wasn't room for much deviation. And it was shot very



quickly — the film was shot in 15 days, so it was important that a momentum be built up and that it be maintained.

**RB:** *How many people were in the crew?*

**AE:** The size of the crew was about 15, I suppose. I think the situation in Toronto is such that there are funding organizations which make it easy for a film to raise more money than it needs and very often that works against a film. It becomes very obvious that it wasn't a lean production, that the focus did not have to be precisely honed because of budgetary limitations. I think that's one of the real joys of working with a small budget — that you have to determine exactly what it is that you need and want to say. The biggest problem with the independent film sector in Toronto is that they very often pad out their budgets to such a degree that they find themselves having to make that budget *show* on screen.

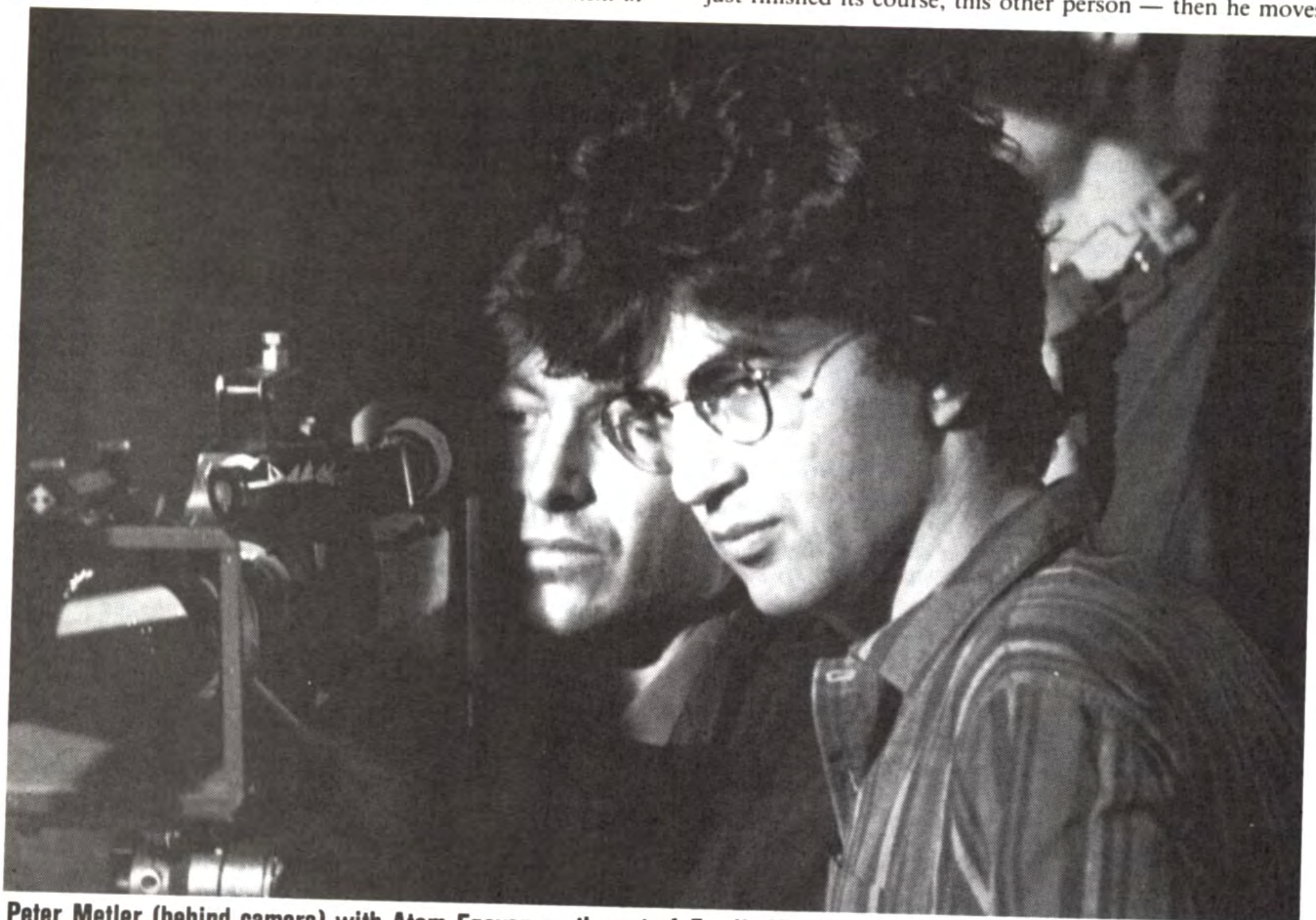
**RB:** *Specifically, what interested me in the film was that a lot of it is about a sense of loss — the loss that occurs not only from generation to generation in video, but also the loss that occurs in people's relationships with each other. For example, the absent mother the son finally comes to grips with and finds through the grandmother. The question for me — and it's an important one, I think, in relation to television is to some degree always about loss. So much of what you see on the TV screen is the result of a process to which you don't have any access. You as a spectator fill in the gaps. What interests me about television is how much we add to it, not how much we take from it, that we fill in the spaces which are there because there are so many. For example, there is a certain moment in*

*the film when the son is in the nursing home and he goes to the television and turns it off because he sees himself in the image — is that correct?*

**AE:** That's a very complicated moment, it's a moment when there is a video surveillance image of the lead going to the hotel room with a stranger, and then what happens is that the Canadian flag comes out and broadcast day is over, and then he turns off the television.

**RB:** *So what is his relationship to the image he has just seen? I ask the question because you see his face but the camera doesn't give you enough time to understand what he is feeling.*

**AE:** It's a very good question. I think what has happened at that point is that the film first of all very accurately reflects my own ambiguity towards the role of certain types of media in our lives — that here you have this medium which is able either to trivialize or to enhance our own feelings towards things, and I think what has happened at that point is that he has been pushed to look towards this 'shrine' as an object of revelation because there are certain things that he has already begun to glean from it in terms of his own identity, his own past. Yet he is not engaged in a dialogue of any importance. It's a very important moment because of what happens right after, because he looks away and realizes that the woman beside his grandmother has died. I think that's an important sequence because it is about this very abstract sense of displacement that he feels the moment he turns off the television. The programme has ended, something has finished, and he has a sense of something having finished its course, and then all of a sudden he turns away and this other thing has just finished its course, this other person — then he moves



Peter Metler (behind camera) with Atom Egoyan on the set of *Family Viewing*.



away and he just pauses for a moment, and all of a sudden his face has a very odd expression; he turns around, he goes back to the beds, he pulls out a screen and at that point the film camera makes a very slow dolly back (at that point he is obscured from view) and looks over the screen to reveal that he is switching the bodies. Now, there are so many things going on in that shot, because first of all that whole action of switching the bodies is such a detached, contrived, manipulated gesture and yet as a character we know he doesn't really understand the full implications of what he is doing, that mentality of things just being switched and "plot points" being added to one's life is something that is obviously derived from his television watching. These sorts of things can happen, identities can be switched, the emotional implications are something that he has not been trained to feel. His whole life has been about separating himself from these sorts of actions. And then of course there is a whole dialogue between the spirit of the film camera, which is something I was focussing on very strongly in the film, the film camera's ability to physically move through space, not zoom through space — every time we have a video camera the movement is through zoom; every time we have a film camera it is a physical movement; these are very subtle things, of course, and I don't expect everyone to pick them up consciously, but I think that there is something there that you must be able to feel, there is an energy at work that I trust my audience will be able to pick up at some level.

**RB:** *I agree with you. It's a really crucial point, because I think both audiences and film-makers tend to underestimate their entire experience of viewing. What interests me is the parallel between the scene you have just described and the scene in which his father and girlfriend are sitting on their bed and viewing their own sexual experiences on video. Their own sexuality becomes an object of their vision and in fact becomes a premise upon which they build their own sexual energy.*

**AE:** Sure. The whole film is about people being convinced that they can reduce themselves to their archetypes. The father's greatest folly is that he really believes he can be a much more simple person than he is; he is not really able to deal with his own complexity as a human being, and that is where the irony of the film comes off, in terms of the language it employs — where he tries desperately to be "TV Dad," to give advice and it's so pat it becomes ridiculous. I was very interested in that whole aspect of the film, the myth that we can simplify our lives, and that technology allows us to trivialize ourselves, if we choose to use it that way.

**RB:** *This links up with another thing I really liked about the film, which is what I see as an interesting exploration of voyeurism and the ambivalence and ambiguity of the voyeuristic act. You believe that you are closer and closer to your fantasies when, by definition, you have to be further and further away in order for the fantasy to work. That tug of war between getting closer and being further away was beautifully represented for me when the parents' videotapes are erased and suddenly the experience of their lives, or of their sexuality, ceases to exist. In other words, they don't really have any faith in their own memories or in their experience. They need that object, the video, and they need the kind of present tense experience which it offers.*

**AE:** Yes, and I think with that in mind, it's a bit of an odd point, but I think there is a substantial difference between the way let's say the old 8mm home movies worked and the way the video works. In an 8mm movie you paid, what was it, \$20 for two and a half minutes of time, and were forced to be selective. You had to make a decision as to what was impor-

tant, what you wanted to record, and therefore there was an active process in your mind where you pre-edited before you shot. Whereas with video you can shoot three hours at a time, and the thing that's very strange is that there is this whole phenomenon of people shooting — you are travelling and see these people shooting the entire experience of going through a city, and maybe in the back of their minds they sustain the illusion that they will edit it all, but I don't think that's it. Advertisers use the phrase a lot, of "being able to record their memories," and that is such a perverse notion! The implications of that are really horrifying, and I tried to make that point in relation to Stan and Sandra's use of video for their sex games.

**RB:** *The film goes through a whole series of crises and at the end, the mother is found, she returns and there is a kind of narrative unity put in place by the film. What made you decide to complete the circle of the narrative in that fashion?*

**AE:** There are two elements at play here. When we first shot it, something very, very weird happened, and it's a good example of how things work intuitively or are improvised: that last scene in the Women's Shelter was one track, a camera moving through space, identifying where we were, moving up to this video surveillance camera perched on top of a booth, and then the video surveillance camera moved to reveal the scene of reunion, which the film camera then identified. So we shot this scene and, in the rough cut of the film, it became clear that this was not working — there was something there which was really falling flat. Then I had the idea of inter-cutting these home videos which Chris had seen before; this boy, moving up to the camera, shielding his eyes. This married so well with the dolly we had of the film camera going up to the video camera that everything we had presented to you visually in the film was not being aesthetically and formally resolved as well. So I think the actual appearance of the mother is in some ways secondary to what is happening, the fusion of the two different types of imagery, which is a much more exciting thing for me. That is the true resolution of the film, I think. When you make a film like this, you must have the highest expectations of your audience. Having worked in situations where we have the lowest expectations of our audience (I'm talking about American commercial television), I automatically thought that you had to marginalize yourself and that there wouldn't be an audience as a result. This film has taught me that in fact people *want* to be challenged, right? But still, films like mine have to be placed in a certain context — they have to be introduced in the right way, because people are not about to embark on a normal sort of film journey, you know? This is not a film that tries to satisfy you and keep you seduced on a moment-to-moment basis. For the first 20 minutes you don't know what's going on! It sets up a very weird world, and what it's asking you to do is to trust that I know what I'm trying to say — and that's audacious, because no-one's heard of me! I've just been very, very lucky with the film having been introduced in the right way. Though I am still very vulnerable to audiences — and it happens all the time — where for some reason the energy doesn't connect and, since the film is very personal, obviously I am made to feel very vulnerable by that. No matter how unsophisticated a film audience is concerning theory or the aesthetics of what it is you're trying to do, the one thing they can detect (and it's uncanny!) is whether or not they're being condescended to. And I think ultimately if you have a very high expectation of your audience and you know exactly what it is you're trying to express through the medium of film, there will always be an audience for you. □



# Scanning Egoyan



by Cameron Bailey

**T**echnology is Canada's alphabet, our first and last resort. Nowhere is technology more fragile than in the Canadian context, perhaps because, whether it be the CN Tower or the Avro Arrow, cable TV or CANDU, it is all communications technology, moments meant to connect an impossible country. It is in part that fragility, that spiderweb sense, that has compelled Canadian artists and academics to approach technology with a maddening absence of hostility. Excoriating the technical realm is difficult in a country born into (and out of) technology, a country whose strongest links have historically been machine-tooled ones — broadcasting and the railway.

Atom Egoyan's feature films, *Next of Kin* (1984) and *Family Viewing* (1987), as snugly as they may fit into Canada's famed "discourse on technology," cannot be limited by it.<sup>1</sup> A framework for interpreting Egoyan's films must also examine their grounding in discourses on the family and on ethnicity, which are, of course, not unrelated to technology. This article is an attempt to discern the links among those three discourses, and to contribute to that interpretive framework, in the belief that the traditional patterns used in discussing Canadian film must be modified to provide useful approaches to Egoyan's work. The technological arena

in *Family Viewing*, for example, intersects with a domestic, rather than a broader social — or, as in Cronenberg, a biological — one. And Egoyan is the first anglophone Canadian feature filmmaker to foreground ethnicity as the hidden wet spot in Canadian culture that it undoubtedly is. Ethnicity, and its state facsimile Multiculturalism, are rendered in Egoyan's films with an ambivalence that withholds as much as they reveal.

Since *Family Viewing* will provide the case for this study, it's necessary to outline what the film is about. *Family Viewing* is about the triumph of recording technology. *Family Viewing* is about video. *Family Viewing* enacts the tragedy of patriarchy. *Family Viewing* is about memory and history. *Family Viewing* is about the loss of the mother (or the mother-position).

Van, a young man just graduating from high school, begins to spend time with his grandmother, Armen, who lies mute in a nursing home where she has been placed by her son-in-law, Stan, Van's father. Van's mother is absent from the family, except in old home videotapes. Stan's new wife, Sandra, carries on a hidden sexual affair with Van, while with Stan (who works for a consumer electronics company) she is the physical body for his telephone sex with part-time sex trade worker Aline. Aline's mother is in the same nursing home as Armen, in fact, in the next bed.



Not long after Van learns that Stan is re-recording his sex with Sandra over the old family tapes, Aline goes to Montreal on an escort job and asks Van to look after her mother. Aline's mother takes an overdose of pills while Aline is away, and dies. Van switches her body with his grandmother's and buries the dead woman (claiming her as his grandmother) in an unmarked grave. When Aline returns he shows her the videotape he made of the funeral. She is outraged, but over time develops a closer relationship with Van. With her help, Van takes his grandmother out of the nursing home and keeps her at Aline's apartment. Van also moves in, having taken a job at a hotel. He plays the videotapes he had stolen from his father, and discovers a scene of his mother abject in bondage.

Stan, having discovered that his sex tapes have been replaced by blanks, and that a woman (Aline) is visiting "his mother's" grave, hires a private detective to track Van and Aline. They move Armen to the hotel, with Stan on their trail. Van has Armen removed from the hotel (dressing her up as a bag lady) just before Stan arrives, distraught from the chase and his memories of the first wife he abused, collapses in a hotel room. In the last scene, Van and Aline find Armen, and Van's mother, at a shelter for the homeless.

The film's narrative is knit together with excerpts from nature documentaries which Stan and Armen watch on television. The bulk of this footage (and voice-over) deals with the hunting and mating behaviour of predators. The tone throughout the film, in acting style, editing pace and so on, is detached; each character is acted with an acute level of self-consciousness.

### "Atom Egoyan": Multiculturalism's Problem Child?

"Ethnic is still in."

JOANNE KATES, *THE GLOBE AND MAIL*, JAN. 28, 1989

If there is a terror barely hidden in Kates' comment, it is at least an honest, if mistaken, one. But it is not the anxiety of "still" or even the hip adjective-made-noun "ethnic" that is for my purposes significant. It's "in." Kates' fragment of fashion discourse suggests not just the transience of *la mode* — that "ethnic" will eventually be "out" — but also that ethnicity had someplace to come *from*, that it somehow invaded the everyday world of the *Globe and Mail's* ideal reader where ethnicity *does not exist*. This is the nature of multiculturalism, and the problem of "Atom Egoyan."

Atom Egoyan, biological subject, has often expressed his skepticism about the federal policy called Multiculturalism, and about positioning himself as an "Armenian filmmaker" within it. Yet there is no doubt that this state apparatus would desire to embrace Egoyan and fashion out of him "Atom Egoyan," Canada's 1st Multicultural Feature Filmmaker, grant-magnet and prize pony. Such is the nature of federal bodies. Multiculturalism, as a historical piece of legislation dispersed through various agencies into the "national consciousness," functions by repeatedly circulating symptoms of non-Western cultures in a laudatory, specular fashion. It can do that only by first locating a centre that is neither multicultural *nor* ethnic, that is simply Canada-propre<sup>2</sup>.

Canadian sociologist John O'Neill, following Mary Douglas' *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, argues

that technological culture places such "figures of disorder" as the body, the family and ethnicity outside of itself, in direct relation to the importance (or centrality) of a particular social discourse:

thus the ethnic, the native, the family, the feminine, the exotic, the wilderness become natural symbols opposed to the techno-symbols of the hegemonic culture of industry, science and technology. (3)

But, as O'Neill writes, these "others" are never simply expunged from society. They are re-appropriated in "a secondary system of natural symbols floated in the *social imaginary*" (3). O'Neill names the media as the institution responsible for this recirculation, but in the Canadian context, one must also point to the federal Secretary of State, Multiculturalism branch.

O'Neill skirts but never dwells on ethnicity's role in *producing* "techno-culture." But placing the two in opposition, he duplicates the pervasive othering of non-Western ethnicity and the Assumption of white Western ethnicity. By eliding the ethnicity of North American techno-culture and its "roots" in western European culture, O'Neill, with the Secretary of State, returns to the centre-margin discourse of Canada-propre. To suggest, on the other hand, as Arthur Kroker does, that we are all marginalized by technology<sup>3</sup> is to assert the eradication of the centre through an act of will, ignoring the power relationships that govern the exercise of technology.

Atom Egoyan's response to the centre/no-centre paradox in ethnicity and technology has ranged from satires on multiculturalism<sup>4</sup> to more complex strategies in *Next of Kin* and *Family Viewing*, where ethnicity, both dominant and marginal, is problematized. *Next of Kin's* plot, about Peter (Patrick Tierney), a young WASP man who passes himself off as an Armenian family's lost son, directs the viewer to see the Armenian family as liberating for him, to see the attraction of emotional warmth, what Robert Fulford (as Marshall Delaney) blissfully called "the exuberant Armenian atmosphere" (53). But the family is dominated by a patriarchal, near-cruel father, and the scene of Peter's birthday party is shot like a nightmare; more than anything it suggests oppressive delirium. The film makes both Armenian and WASP ethnicity strange.

In *Family Viewing*, WASP ethnicity is again made strange, and here too, the home is the site of strangeness. All the scenes in the family's condominium were shot sitcom-like on videotape, with three cameras and a switcher rather than with the usual one-camera system. Collapsing TV form upon habitual TV watchers makes one point about the connections among technology, the family and WASP ethnicity; choosing a detached, anti-television acting style makes another. Much of the meaning of these scenes in the family home is built in the pauses between lines of dialogue, and by the actors' inexpressive faces. The dialogue is laboriously, etymologically *di-ologue*: characters speak to each other in a back-and-forth, question and answer style that seems as artificial as a catechism. The dialogue interrupts "unnatural" pauses (or vice versa), taking the form of a pre-determined game, as if technique had invaded conversation. TV close-ups conceal rather than reveal here, and the actors, particularly Aidan Tierney (Van) function in the way blonde women function in Hitchcock films — to signify both the powerfully foreign and the powerfully attractive.

Cultural difference is figured less oppositionally in *Family Viewing* than in *Next of Kin*. While *Next of Kin's* plot hinges on the difference between the WASP and Armenian families,



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in *Family Viewing* ethnic difference complicates (not polarizes) the relationship between the father and the son, which is played out on the bodies of the two "fully" Armenian characters, Van's mother and his grandmother, Armen.<sup>5</sup>

## Technology and the Canadian Mind

According to Fulford, Egoyan was named Atom by his parents to celebrate the advent of atomic energy in Egypt, his birthplace (55). This seems a fitting point on which to pivot to address technology more directly.

It would shock no one to suggest that the encroachment of technology in the 20th century into every sphere of human activity has had serious effects on the way we live, that is now governs what we call our private lives. What I also want to suggest is that private life, specifically family life, affects technology. There is significance to our use of complex electronic instruments in our homes; it lies largely in the internalization of progress. Technology is only the physical manifestation of technique, its hardware. Jacques Ellul in *The Technological Society* defines technique as "any complex of standardized norms for attaining a pre-determined result." (Merton's Foreword, vi) Nietzsche, George Grant, and others have all hit on technique as modernity's primary mode of thought (although Ellul stresses technique's antiquity). Technique is a mode of thought that always aims towards the improvement of systems, hence more and more sophisticated technology. Combine that with the planned obsolescence and commodity fetishism inherent in consumer capitalism, and the result is better and smaller and faster and cheaper chunks of technology. Every year. The notion of progress within the home sanctions the development of technology outside the home, which in turn feeds the home with more spinoff technology. Arthur Kroker, in concluding *Technology and the Canadian Mind*, writes:

If this is an age of such great social anxiety and stress, then it is so, in good part, because there is now such a radical separation between the swift tempo of public events, based as they are on the rapid unfolding of the logic of the technological imperative, and private life, which still works off of traditional habits of perception. (126).

But there seems in this something of O'Neill's separation of technology and "real life," which suppresses the interconnections of the two spheres. Owning a satellite TV system is a way of saying 'yes' to international surveillance satellites. Owning a microwave oven gets one used to the idea of radiation. Owning a television encourages the Bomb.<sup>6</sup> It should come as no surprise that Sweden's Saab Corporation makes both yuppie cars and jet fighters. Such are the workings of technology.

## Family Pictures

"Dad . . . with this little unit, no matter what the rest of the family says, you've still got your own second TV!"

CANADIAN HOME SHOPPING CLUB, APRIL 5, 1989<sup>7</sup>

*Family Viewing* shares with *Next of Kin* a concern with family, with ethnicity, with looking and the technology of looking, with privacy and with memory. The film approaches most of these areas dualistically: like so many of its characters it seems to suggest that "there are two ways of looking at this." One could compile a list of binary opposi-

tions in the film — WASP/"ethnic," observer/object, film/video, male/female — that on closer inspection would fail to hold to their absolute difference from one another, or to upset the traditional hierarchy within the pair. The screen presence of brothers Patrick and Aiden Tierney, for example — bland, blanched, and withdrawn — is used in *Next of Kin* and *Family Viewing* to contrast with the Armenian characters in both films. And yet they're not the norm to the Armenian other — *they're* the outsiders. The lead characters in both films — the white, male unified subjects at the heart of Western narrative cinema — have been decentred.

On a formal level, the opposition of film and video footage in *Family Viewing* is misleading. Video images in the condominium and film images elsewhere suggest, by virtue of image texture alone, that the film constructs an opposition between the mediated nature of this family's existence (also shot in colder, blue colours) and the warmer, more "real" environment of down-to-earth Armenian women. But that opposition will not hold. There are instances where video is used that do not fit that pattern,<sup>8</sup> and there is nothing apart from the grain of the filmic image to suggest that the hotel where Van works, for example, is a warm, real place. Video represents not any specific point of view, but a governing zeitgeist. The cuts from one television screen to another and the flashes of video memory that Stan and Van have are, like Nicholas Roeg's associative editing, narrative more than character functions; they help create the technological landscape of the film.

The family structure in *Family Viewing* viewing also confounds simple oppositions. Like *Next of Kin*, this film's family emanates from a strong patriarch (strong in the sense of controlling, if not authoritarian), but becomes complicated from there. The position of Van's mother, for example, is occupied by four women — his biological mother, his stepmother and lover Sandra, and Aline, also perhaps his lover, but by virtue of her sex trade link to Van's father, she is also half (with Sandra) of Stan's two-part sex partner (sex is in fact incomplete without her; she's the voice to Sandra's body), and so a sort of a step-stepmother. And Armen, his grandmother, is the only woman from whom he receives anything close to maternal affection. Except Armen, all of Van's "mothers" engage in submissive sex with his father, which may be why his grandmother is the only one he can hug.

It's also interesting that both *Family Viewing* and *Next of Kin* skirt with incest taboos — Peter and his new sister in *Next of Kin*, Van and Sandra in *Family Viewing*. In both cases the "incest" is contrived, an accident of situation rather than a fact of blood, but the taboo is still powerful enough to be used as dramatic material. Whether or not Peter and his sister will sleep together creates dramatic tension, as does Van's "perverse" relationship with his stepmother. The family construct as a legal or social unit, apart from blood ties, is one with deep roots.

The roots go back to Genesis. There and throughout the Old Testament's Pentateuch, patrilineal genealogy gets its first written exposure in the Western tradition, as do most of the Western family's institutions: patriarchy, strict sexual taboos, simultaneous misogyny and mother-worship, division of women into wives and concubines, and the notion of children as capital investment, maturing over 15 years or so and turning a tidy profit for the father. Gerald Leslie and Sheila Korman, in a standard sociology text called *The Family in Social Context* find a shift to monogamous, patrilineal and patriarchal family structure in Hebrew, Greek and Roman ancient societies. The reason for the shift is largely



economic. In "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State" Frederick Engels writes that what he calls the "monogamian" family

is based on the supremacy of the man; its express aim is the begetting of children of undisputed paternity, this paternity being required in order that these children may in due time inherit their father's wealth as his natural heirs. (492)

As social and economic structures became more complex (and especially as social stratification developed), the question of paternity became more important. Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh, two British sociologists of the family, note in *The Anti-Social Family* that "The main way in which social classes reproduce themselves over time is by bearing and rearing children" (43). Not just inheriting wealth is important here, but also the fact that most boys don't grow up to move very far out of their father's class. Barrett and McIntosh insist on the family's role in maintaining class lines.

Leslie and Korman, armed with similar data, come at the family from a far less hostile position. In a subsection of their textbook titled "Nuclear Family Functions" (this is a book published in 1985) the authors number the reasons for the nuclear family as (1):

meeting the sexual needs of adults, (2) the nuclear family is the unit of reproduction, (3) the nuclear family is a unit of common residence, (4) the nuclear family is the primary unit of economic cooperation, and (5) the nuclear family has important responsibility for the socialization of children. (14)

Regulating sex, economy and socialization. No wonder the state has such a keen interest in maintaining the nuclear family. Leslie and Korman also note, and this may be relevant to *Family Viewing*, that even though almost all cultures have incest taboos, few cultures have the *same* incest taboos, and taboo family members are rarely a matter of closeness of blood kinship. Incest taboos can also be read economically, as a way of ensuring that wealth is circulated outside the nuclear family. The authors note that where brother-sister incest is permitted (on some occasions in royal families, for instance) it has almost always been to keep wealth within the family (39-40).

As a methodological note I should acknowledge the necessary blindness of such an entity as "the family." Barrett and McIntosh quote sociologist Michael Anderson as claiming that there has been no *single* family system in the West since the 16th century (81), and sociologist Peter Laslett disagreeing (83). They use the term "the family" as an ideological construct (probably a good idea), and they follow the work of Jacques Donzelot, who, using Michel Foucault's methods, has diffused the idea of family into what he calls "familialism." According to Donzelot, in the 20th century the power and authority of the family have largely been claimed by the state, which now works — in a familial way — *through* the family. So family systems as they've developed in the West (and probably in the East and the South too) are primarily economic units designed to interlock with the authority of the state. They are the next level of government up from self-regulation.

So guardedly we can take "the family," the *nuclear* family, as both a manifestation and a breeding ground of technique. The term itself, and the atomistic metaphor it suggests, are scientific — the phrase has within it those lines of power, of dissection and aggregation. Furthermore, modern image technology, in addition to benefitting from the effect

of all domestic technology on development that was mentioned earlier, has in return created something of a memory industry within family systems. Snapshots, home movies and home tapes commodify family memories, creating the notion of an empirical domestic history, as well as concretizing the notion of progress. A family's image records cannot help but be used as a reference against which to measure the capital success of the present. On the level of the individual photograph, similar patterns of increase and dominance are at work. By the gesture, composition, choice of subject (family "events," trips, birthdays, etc.) and the absence of the photographer, hierarchies of importance reveal themselves. Snapshots answer the question, "What *must* we record?" To attempt to contextualize all of this, some history of family images is necessary. We've got to go back.

It was in 16th century Europe that the genre of painting known as the portrait came into existence. According to Remy Saisselin, author of *Style, Truth and the Portrait*, figure painting

comes into its own as a genre when the person portrayed occupies the center of the panel as the nobility and the gentleman came to occupy the center of the public life. The portrait, removed from the religious painting and the fresco, seen to be more than a painted medal or a derivation of sculpture, appears with the growing secularization of life and the development of late Renaissance *courtoisie*. (2)

Along with the portrait came the overt, direct acknowledgement of the spectator. The subject of a portrait *posed* (Saisselin, 3), looking out (often down) upon the spectator with all the height of his position. That this sort of direct gaze and dominance of the frame was even possible can clearly be linked to the rise of secular capitalism. The individual's place in society, though still bound by class, was no longer seen to be fixed by God. The citizen's fortunes were mutable, which meant one could aspire, one could strut one's worldly stuff. The new nobility did just that (it always does), flexing its representational muscles, asserting its presence, and perhaps more importantly, its dominance within society. Portraits were born with a formal, official function, Saisselin writes (8); they were addressed specifically to society and to posterity.

Towards the end of the 18th century, he continues, European nobility was being forced to share the frame with the burgeoning bourgeoisie:

Wit gave way to sensibility, rakishness to virtue, and poets and painters assumed the air of genius, profound and suffering, while the bourgeois little by little began to look more like himself, important. (20)

The portrait artist, for his part, was seen throughout this period as an *interpreter* of human faces and gesture, someone whose task it was to "fix" a person's characteristic look. The large element of human *technique* in these descriptions suggests that portraiture was considered to be an act of will.

This question of likeness is and has always been central to painted portraiture (and its other, landscape painting), but is irrelevant in photography. Whether or not a photo portrait actually looks like its subject, it remains a mechanical-chemical record of an actual "event." A photograph always affirmed that "this happened" (whether or not the event was staged). In addition, to follow Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, the photograph "is never anything but an antiphon of 'Look,' 'See,' 'Here it is'; it points a finger" (5). Marshall McLuhan, in *Understanding Media*, offers for consideration the title of William Henry Fox Talbot's paper on



photography presented to the Royal Society in 1839.<sup>9</sup> It was titled "Some account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing, or the process by which natural objects may be made to delineate themselves without the aid of the artist's pencil" (171). Significant in both assertions is the *automatic* nature of photography, that it necessarily records, not so much what is in front of the lens, but that something *was* in front of the lens. Barthes recalls that the original photographic equipment developed out of cabinet making and precision machinery: "cameras, in short, were clocks for seeing" (15). "I can never deny that the thing has been there" (76), he writes, calling reference the founding order of photography, and in a charmingly Gallic fashion, declaring himself "scandalized" by this referential quality (82).

Barthes never writes at length on the photography within the family (he asserts that he is uninterested in sociology), but he does make an important distinction between memory and testimony:

Not only is the photograph never, in essence, a memory . . . but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory. One day, some friends were talking about their childhood memories; they had any number; but I, who had just been looking at my old photographs, had none left. (91)

Photographs are instead, per Barthes, testimony, material products rather than elusive memories, *external* evidence. A family photograph *constitutes* the family outside of itself. It demarcates it, formally in the case of studio photographs, informally in the case of snapshots. But it also constitutes the

photographer — usually the father — within technology but slightly outside of the family. The photographer within a family is most often the family member *absent* from its photographs. And family photos, over time, seem designed to display the development of children, just as journalistic photos, over time, display the development of political power and magazine photos display the development (or constant regeneration) of stars or products. Barthes writes that

the age of Photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such, publicly. (98)

McLuhan, less elegantly, suggests that mass-produced photographs have created a "brothel without walls" of public images to be consumed.

It is tempting to suggest that, in the wake of portrait painting's demise, domestic photography has had a democratizing effect on families. Painted portraits were available only to the aristocracy — and then to the aspiring bourgeoisie — while today it is possible to enter a drug store and buy a disposable camera for a few dollars. But family snapshots do not have the same rhetoric as portraits; they haven't the formal, official function that Saisselin ascribed to historical painted portraits, and that still applies to portraits — paintings *or* photographs — today.

McLuhan writes that "the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs."<sup>24</sup> Photography, it seems, as the first domestic image-producing technology, has been



Aline (Arsinee Khanjian) and Van (Aidan Tierney) at the unmarked grave.





**Aline playing her part in family pornography.**

instrumental in reconstituting the family, in maintaining it, and in reinforcing technical society. As McLuhan points out later in *Understanding Media*, much modern science — molecular physics, astronomy, microbiology — could not proceed without photography or some form of visual record. Photography's existence as an accepted *technique* within state apparatuses like the media and more importantly within the family, are integral cogs in the science industry.

Kroker writes in *Technology and the Canadian Mind* that

it is a distinctively modern fate to *live* technology as a kind of second biology which, whether in city architecture, chemically processed foods, sound production or the zooming lens of the camera eye, defines and limits the human condition. (128)

Which is the long way of saying, as Grant does, that "technique is ourselves" (Kroker, 28, Grant, 137). It is within us and we within it. But it is here that Kroker suggests that "in the world of the silicon chip, there are no centres and no margins. Everyone is peripheralized by the systemic logic of technological society." (129) This sort of fatalism is irresponsible. To enter into the complex genealogy of technology and its power structures is beyond the scope of this study, but I can suggest one class of people at home in technology and technique, at home because they created it in their own image. Fathers.

In two intercut scenes toward the end of *Family Viewing*, Stan discovers his sex tapes are missing as Van discovers the image of his mother being tied up by his father on video. Stan, the father, is a bland embodiment of Grant's idea of the "will to will" — his desire is solely for uncomplicated mas-

tery. Stan is, in many ways, a monster. This sequence, with its elaborately balanced anagnorises and its culmination in the film's limit image, climaxes the film. It, like much of the film, is structured on looks, and the power, mastery or victimization inherent. It begins with something of a reconstitution of the family, but as always, it is mediated. Armen and Van look through a TV screen at Stan looking through a window at Van's mother and Van. This set-up (the shot of the father watching and videotaping the family) is also the last shot of the film. Stan congratulates his son for learning an English song, exercising the patriarch's power to enforce culture. (Stan's attempts to obliterate the Armenian in his son are particularly chilling in light of the history of Armenia in the 20th century.) There is a cut to Stan in his bedroom; he's discovered that his sex tapes are "all blank." Now after a cut from Stan looking at the video camera in his bedroom to Armen looking at the television screen, something interesting happens. Armen turns away — the cut linking her and Stan makes it seem as if she is turning away from him — but when she averts her gaze it draws Van. It's as if the screen won't exist if it doesn't have a viewer; the tube abhors a vacuum. The family scene on the television has been replaced by another spectacle — pornography, in fact, family pornography. And like most porn it is the face not the genitals that is most threatening. Here Van's mother — gagged — looks at the camera in a gesture of silent abjection (she, like the grandmother, is always silent). This is *Family Viewing's* limit image. Especially when the camera zooms in (how does it zoom in? who operates it?) the film reaches its emotional and symbolic apex. The image, now oversaturated with grain and scan rolls, disappearing into static, is the forbidden snapshot,



the suppressed entry in the family album; in this context, with the mother's gaze directly meeting the son's, it becomes Van's belated, overcharged primal scene. A variation of this close-up of Van's mother — this time smiling — looms over Stan after his collapse in the hotel room at the end of the film.

## Slave to the Medium: Egoyan Scanning

"Central to the human situation in the 20th century," Kroker writes, "is the profound *paradox* of modern technology as simultaneously a prison-house and a pleasure palace." (125) The point I've wanted to make is that both edifices are located on suburban (and urban) streets; they are where we live. *Family Viewing* may be too ambivalent to nail down under one of Kroker's three responses to technology — humanism, dependency or realism. Shifting to literary terms might in this instance provide a more profitable lexicon. If David Cronenberg's films often function as anatomies of technological life, Egoyan's work follows in the tradition of the elegy. Using John Milton's "Lycidas" as an example, C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon (*A Handbook to Literature*, Fifth Edition) cite the hallmarks of the pastoral elegy as follows: "the invocation of the Muse, and expression of the grief felt in the loss of a friend, a procession of mourners, a digression (on the church), and, finally, a consolation in which the poet submits to the inevitable and declares that everything has turned out for the best, usually through a strengthened belief in immortality." (362) Simply by changing some of the terms ("a friend" to "the mother," "the church" to "sex," etc.) one could arrive at *Family Viewing*'s narrative line. The film's ending, with its wistful reconstruction of the family, does display something of the elegy's traditional consolation. But if *Family Viewing* is to be read as an elegy, it is as an urban, not a pastoral one. Egoyan's urban landscapes, still muted compared to the way many of us experience them, are nevertheless new to Canadian film, and new to Canada-*propre*. His concerns and methods seem on one level to be textbook "Canadian," but the films have expanded the frames of reference, if only to force Canadian critics to engage with ethnicity, to make that one more factor in the technology-voyeurism equation. □

## Notes

1. At the time of this writing Egoyan's third feature, *Speaking Parts*, was complete but unreleased. From conversations with the director, it appears the film's themes are consistent with the earlier work, and much of the cast of *Family Viewing* appears in *Speaking Parts*.
2. The French word is used to include the alternate meanings of "cleanness" and "ownership" lost in English. Any biculturalism is accidental.
3. *Technology and the Canadian Mind*, 129.
4. "Looking For Nothing," 30-minute episode of *Inside Stories*, CBC Television, Fall, 1988.
5. Although "Armenianness" is not an essential dramatic tool here as in *Next of Kin*, it does lend resonance to certain thematic patterns and characters, particularly to Armen. I include the following notes from a British primer on Armenia to suggest something of the country's popular history in the West:
  - Christianity developed in Armenia in the fourth century, independently of Rome and Constantinople, and eventually flourished immediately beside the Moslem Ottoman empire.
  - At least a million and a half Armenians (about one third of the population) were killed in two massacres around the turn of this century: by Sultan Abdul Hamid between 1894 and 1896, and by the "Young Turk" regime between 1915 and 1918.
  - Until the massacre began in 1915, Armenians had occupied the same territory for 2,500 years.

- Turkey has changed all the place names in what was once Armenia, obliterating the Armenian presence there.
- Soon after Armenia was awarded to the Soviet Union at a post-war Paris conference, Stalin merged Soviet Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan to eliminate nationalisms. (Lang and Walker)

This popular image of Armenia-as-victim is relevant to a reading of Armen, a mostly unwanted old woman who is shut away, then given someone else's identity, then shuffled around from place to place for the rest of the film.

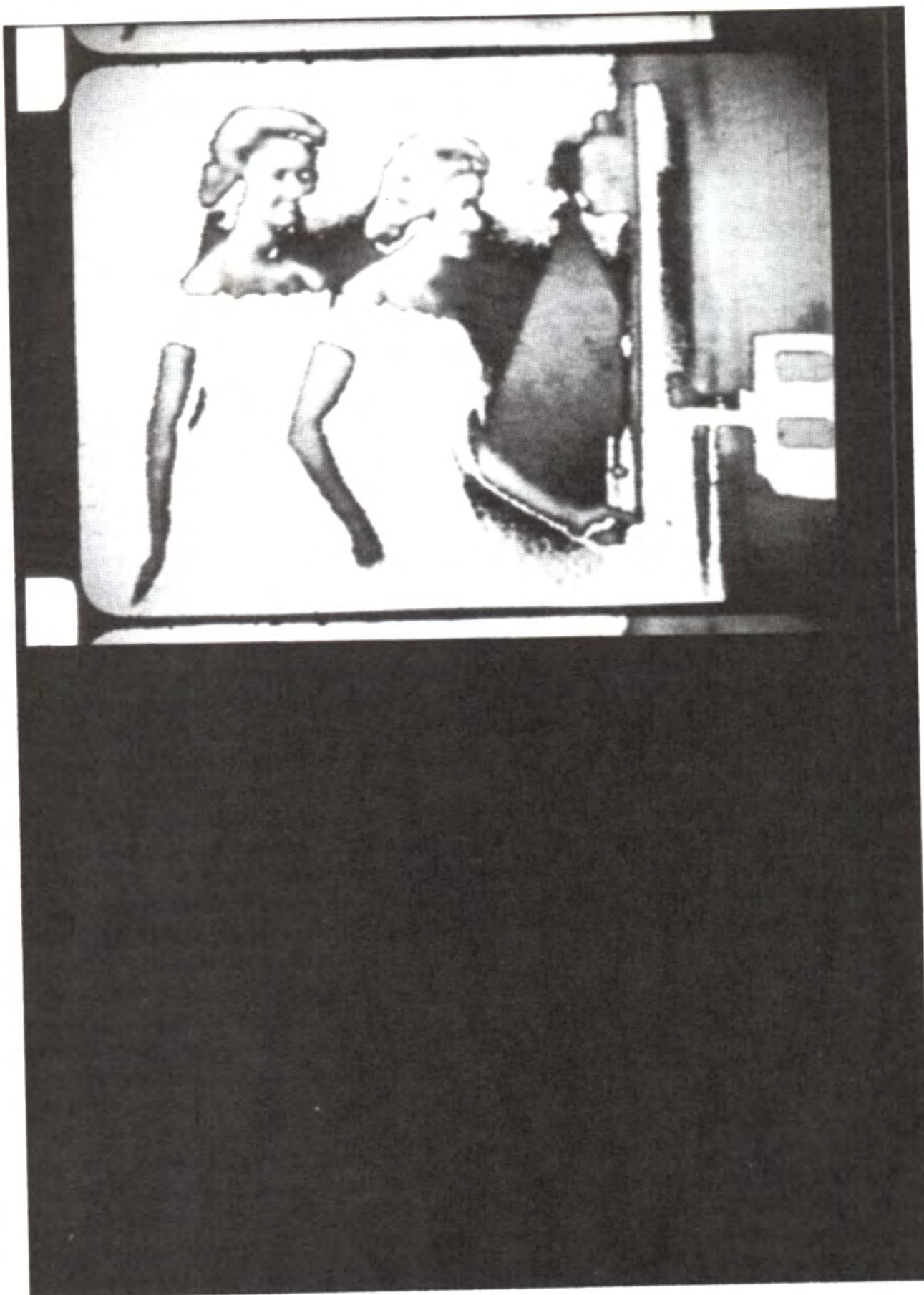
6. See Joyce Nelson's *The Perfect Machine*. Toronto: Between The Lines, 1987.
7. Maclean-Hunter cable television, Toronto. Item advertised is J-I-L portable television/clock/radio, \$129.99.
8. In the opening credit sequence, for example, Van looks directly at the camera, which by the logic of his location is a television screen, and appears to turn a channel selector. Different images appear (accompanied by recorded audience sound effects) that serve mainly to introduce the characters and the world of the film.
9. Fox Talbot is the forgotten other "father" of photography, obscured in the shadow of Daguerre.

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# REPRODUCTION AND REPETITION OF HISTORY: DAVID RIMMER'S FOUND FOOTAGE



*As Seen on T.V.*

**by Catherine Russell**

As the world of memory breaks up more quickly and the mythic in it surfaces more quickly and crudely, a completely different world of memory must be set up even faster to oppose it. That is how the accelerated pace of technology looks in the light of today's prehistory.

*WAKING*, Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

In postmodern culture, with its slippery signifiers and disseminated subjects, history has perhaps replaced desire as the Great Repressed. Memory stunted by nostalgia struggles against

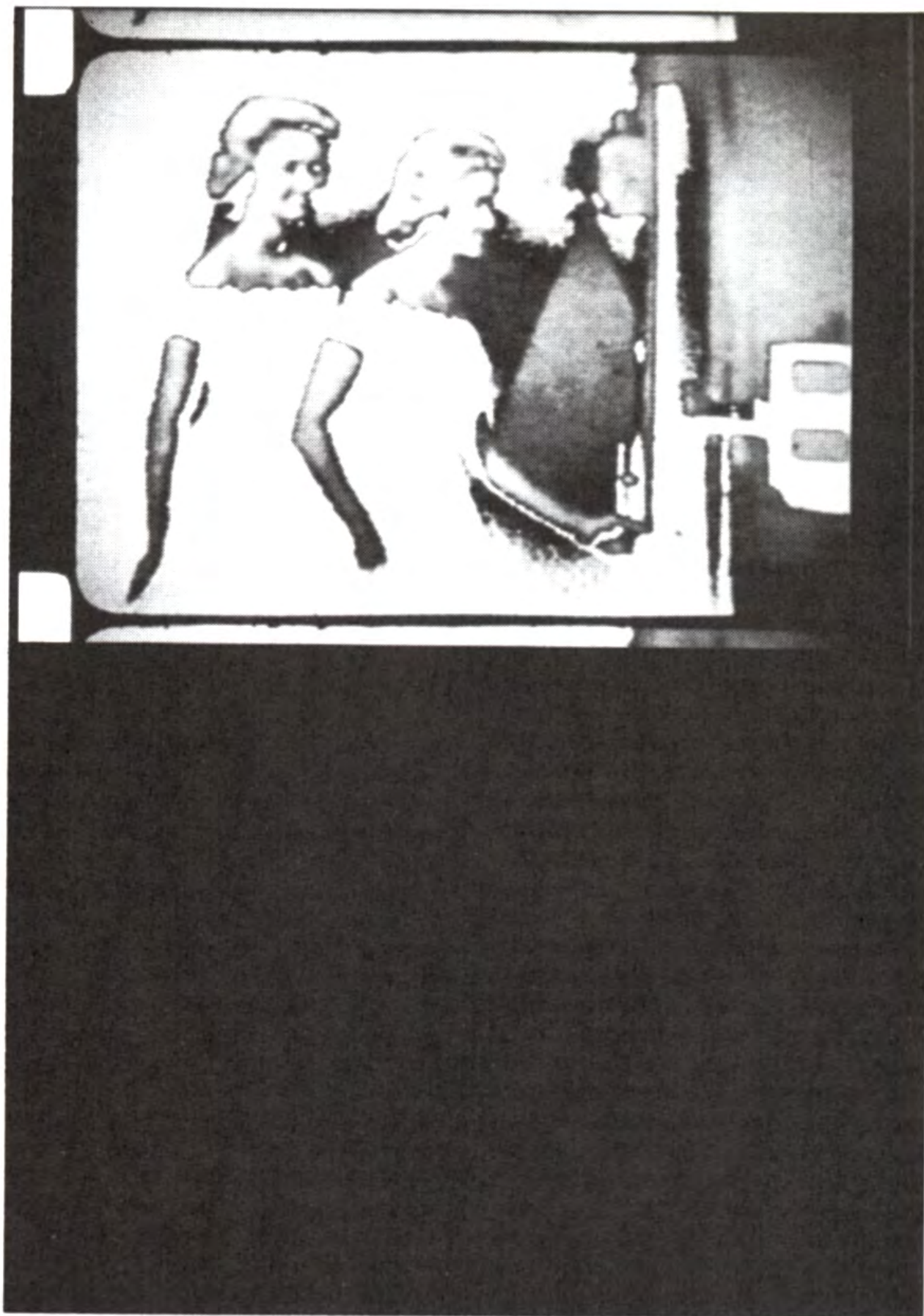
the myths of style and the fence-Posts of Critical Theory. What we need, indeed, is "a completely different world of memory," another historiography, which would not simply be a vision of the future with a rear-view mirror, but an historiography of the images within that vision and its mirror. The different dimensions of such a world, with all their paradoxes and contradictions, are suggested in the films of David Rimmer.

The two principle frameworks that have been offered for Rimmer's work are, to some extent, characteristic of this tendency to repress history. Rimmer's short cinema-specific, non-narrative films have first of all been situated

within the category of "structural materialist" cinema.<sup>2</sup> As P. Adams Sitney originally defined structural film (as works in which "shape is the primal impression" attained through the use of fixed camera position, flicker effect, loop printing and rephotography off the screen),<sup>3</sup> Rimmer's work would seem to fit fairly comfortably into that category. In a major essay on the pre-1980 corpus, Al Razutis maintains that "the presence of metaphor and poetic content" distinguishes Rimmer's work from the "tedious didacticism" of structural film,<sup>4</sup> and yet Razutis's analyses of the films privilege the formal elements over their imagery, as he points out in detail



# REPRODUCTION AND REPETITION OF HISTORY: DAVID RIMMER'S FOUND FOOTAGE



*As Seen on T.V.*

the diverse and complex ways in which Rimmer works upon the materiality of the cinematic signifier.

The second critical paradigm in which Rimmer's work has been situated is Bruce Elder's theorization of Canadian experimental film. Elder has suggested that the Canadian avant-garde cinema is characterized by a pervasive concern with the nature of photographic representation.<sup>5</sup> The relationship between absence and presence implicit in photography is construed as first of all, a phenomenological relationship between the subject of vision and the object seen; as secondly, off-screen and on-screen space; and thirdly, past

and present. Rimmer's films, along with those of a number of other Canadian filmmakers, is thus discussed by Elder in these terms. Again, the description seems to fit.

The formalism of both critical approaches is symptomatic of the literature on avant-garde film in general, and in the case of the rich imagery of Rimmer's films, is particularly striking. If Rimmer's films are "postmodern," as both Elder and Razutis claim,<sup>6</sup> they are so by virtue of their pictures as much as by their structures. I would like to sketch an alternative critical framework, in the terms of a representation of history, that might account for the images

that underscore Rimmer's formal achievements.

Most of the films that Elder and Razutis consider were made between 1969 and 1974. Since the early '80s, when this criticism was published, Rimmer has made a number of films, including *Bricolage* (1984) and *As Seen on TV* (1986). These films hark back in crucial ways to Rimmer's 1970 film *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* and five subsequent films from that period insofar as they are made up of "found" or archival footage.<sup>7</sup> *Along the Road to Altamira* (1986), includes both Rimmer's own footage and images that were originally shot by other people.



Razutis has identified Bruce Conner as a major source of influence on Rimmer's use of found footage, and yet there are significant differences between the two filmmakers' recourse to the cultural image bank. Where Conner's footage can often be traced to well-known historical moments and figures, such as the Kennedy Assassination, Rimmer's images tend more toward anonymity. While styles of representation and costume may be recognizable as specific to given decades, the fragments of movements are pulled from unidentifiable, and yet provocative sources. They are glimpses into a history buried under a continuum of images, quotidian moments brought briefly to the surface of a new, historically distant consciousness.

Rimmer's treatment of this found footage invariably involves both reproduction and repetition. It is rephotographed and often altered in crucial ways, and it is also repeated in the form of loops, in which fragments of film are edited with the end cut to the beginning. An isolated movement or action is thus repeated over and over as well as being reproduced by means of optical printing.

The difference between reproduction and repetition is arguably crucial to the politics of postmodern representation. When Frederic Jameson, for example, says that in pastiche, "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts,"<sup>8</sup> the implication is that these texts can be repeated *ad infinitum* in all the various forms of intertextuality, but the historical referent which lies beyond such repetition cannot. Jacques Lacan points out that "in Freud's texts repetition is not reproduction . . . To reproduce is what one thought one could do in the optimistic days of catharsis. One had the primal scene in reproduction as today one has pictures of the great masters for 9 francs 50."<sup>9</sup> Reproduction has a relation to the Real that is lacking in repetition, which takes place on the level of the signifier.

Paul Arthur has argued that if independent filmmakers avoid the worst features of pastiche in their use of stock or found material, it is "through the foregrounding of material and ultimately social differences" between the production values of the original footage and those of the filmmaker's recombination. Found images tend to be appropriated along with an historical context, consisting of an economic, social and aesthetic apparatus that lies completely outside the technical resour-

ces of the independent filmmaker.<sup>10</sup> While I want to look more closely at the representation of history in *Bricolage*, *As Seen on TV* and *Along the Road to Altamira*, the production codes that distinguish the found footage in Rimmer's earlier films might be briefly summarized as follows: in *Variations* it seems to be industrial; in *Watching for the Queen* (1973), newsreel (and is specifically designated as such in Phil Hoffman's use of the same footage in *O, Zoo*); in *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970), either a travelogue or WWI newsreel; and in *The Dance* (1970), a narrative film. Of course, production codes can be faked (as in Woody Allen's *Zelig*), and in the last two the sources are extremely ambiguous. Nevertheless, as Arthur points out, the images are all outside the filmmaker's own social, economic and technical sphere of production and are brought into it by processing of rephotography.

Where the earlier films each employ a single length of found footage, which is then either looped or fragmented into constitutive frames (*Surfacing on the Thames*) or both (*Watching for the Queen*), *Bricolage* incorporates five such lengths. Different sounds, or kinds of sounds, accompany each fragment, emphasizing the collage structure. The title of *Bricolage* refers most immediately to the plurality of images in this film, as well as to the image of bricks and a brick wall.

Vsevolod Pudovkin once equated filmmaking to brick-laying in a famous articulation of narrative construction, and in *Bricolage*, Rimmer extends the analogy to the frame itself, which is of course, shaped something like a brick.<sup>11</sup> Unlike Pudovkin's bricks, these frames contain other frames, and the female image is repeatedly that which is contained, as it has been in the history of narrative film. *Bricolage* is a film about cinematic signification, and yet the signified content, the referent, constantly intrudes on the play of signifiers. Puns have always been central to Rimmer's work, linking title, image and structure on the level of the signifier, a feature which alone points to the postmodern aspect of his films. While the brick is a signifier that slides all over the film, the women in *Bricolage* remain the objects of representation, lurking behind this playfulness.

The 10-minute film opens with an image of a woman's face seen in the opening of a kinoscope, with a hand turning the knob attached to the box. Where screen and lens are virtually equated in the kinoscopic apparatus,

Rimmer further analogizes the frame around the woman's head to a shooting target by superimposing a graphic white target on the circular frame around the woman's face. The woman in the box is targeted as being at a spatial and temporal distance from the viewer. Moreover, the few frames of her movement are repeated by way of Rimmer's repetition which includes the hand repeating the movement of turning, thereby acknowledging not only the historical nature of the original apparatus, but its participation in the genesis of movement.

In another section of *Bricolage*, the original movement, which seems to be taken from a 1950s action/adventure narrative film, is itself edited together "seamlessly," so that when it is looped with a cut on action, the repetitions are literally circular. Through 14 repetitions, a hermetic self-enclosed unit is extracted from what was once a continuous flow. A boy smashes a window with a hammer, confronts the occupants of the house, gets punched, returns to his friends, smashes the window, etc., while a slightly disynchronous soundtrack, escalating in dramatic suspense, is also repeated and anticipates the phases of the action. In the course of the repetitions, a graphic white outline is superimposed on the smashed window, recalling the shape of the brick and the previous placement of the target/lens. This time it is on the site of violence, which is emphasized when it flashes red a couple of times.

By means of displacement and replacement, the smashing of this empty frame as brick and window is related to the female image. A sequence which recurs in the course of the film begins with a black and white brick wall that fragments into a crumbling mass of chiaroscuro rectangles, so that the dissolve into the subsequent abstraction of a woman who seems to be addressing the camera creates the effect of her being behind this "wall." Fragments of the phrase, "Plus que ça change, plus que ça reste la même" are spoken by a woman's voice over the looped indecipherable action. The graphic white rectangle, metonymically related to the brick, target, and window, slides over the woman's solarized image as it is reduced to linear flashes of white and coloured light.

In the last shot of the film this disintegrated image gradually coalesces into a representational image which seems to come from an advertisement for a window cleaning product. A woman holds a rectangular piece of glass in front of



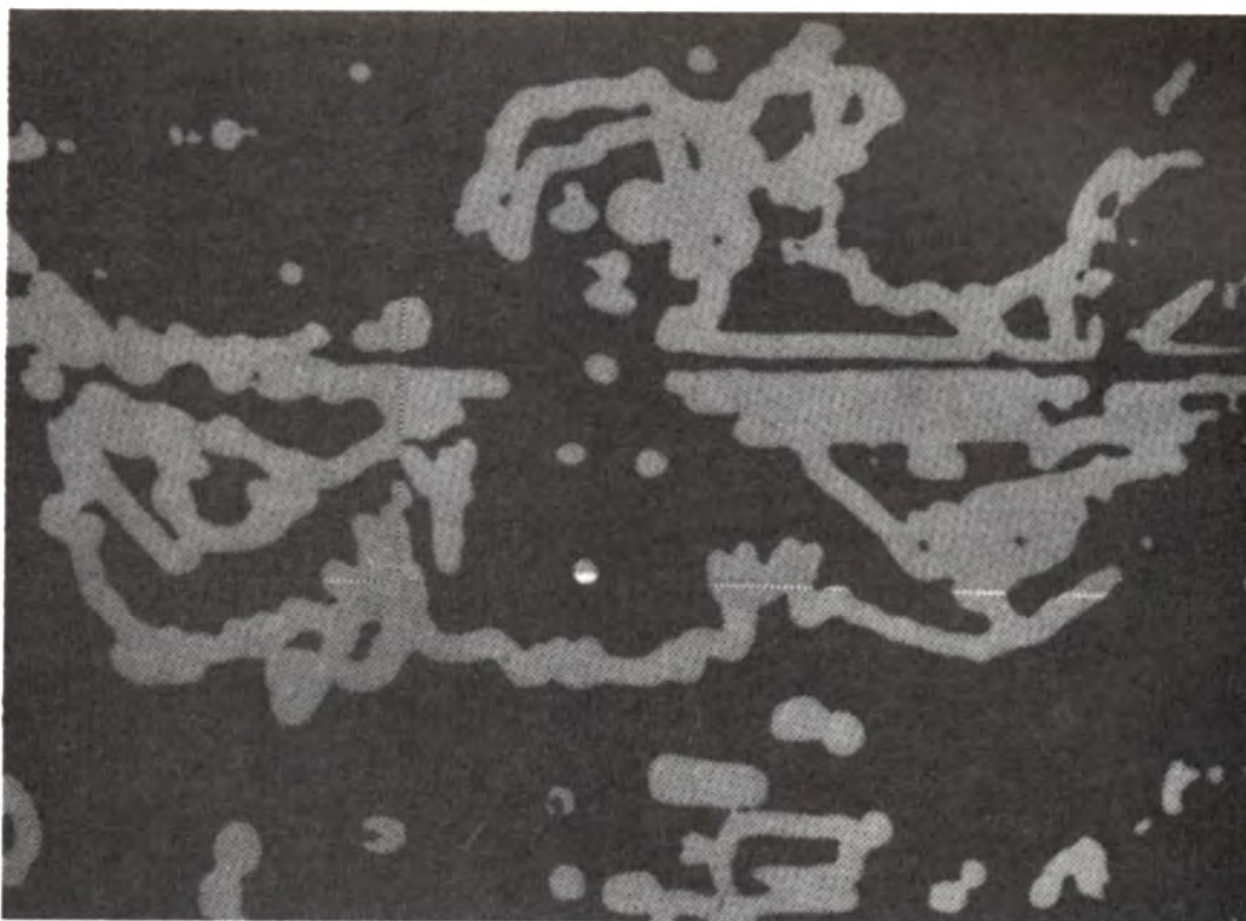
her and moves it back and forth to reframe her face in one half and then the other half. This is the image that was first revealed behind the brick wall, but the abstractions of Rimmer's optical printing have until now withheld the referent. The voice-over continues, the phrase now recognizable, although still fragmented by a variety of tonal articulations.

Several parallels exist between this final sequence and Rimmer's 1970 film *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper*, which begins with a black and white shot of a woman lifting a huge piece of cellophane in a factory. The brief movement is repeated on a loop, while the graphic components of the image are repeated in variations of rephotography and solarization. In *Variations* the original image is left behind; whereas in *Bricolage* it is finally disclosed, literally reproduced from its components of light and celluloid. The material substratum of celluloid and cellophane is absent from *Bricolage*, the final image of which is far less stable than that of the brief originating image of *Variations*. It has been "found" by the viewer at the end of the film rather than (or as well as) by the filmmaker in the archive.

Two other mid-sections of *Bricolage* are both sepia-tinted and are not repeated, thereby privileging the singular actions that they contain. One of these (the second segment of the film), begins with a close-up of a high-heeled shoe and a stockinged ankle turning provocatively. Cut to a long-shot of a group of men and women dressed in '20s style fashions, including the woman who continues turning her ankle. Then she reaches down and removes the artificial leg to which the high-heeled shoe is attached, and hands it to one of the men.<sup>12</sup> The other singular action, which occurs before the final repetition of the woman and the wall, is simply of a woman dressed in a wedding gown disappearing in a cloud of smoke.

These sequences effectively deconstruct the notion of the fetish. In both cases, the woman's body, by disappearing, is cast as an empty signifier, a failed attempt at disavowal of the cinematic illusion. The eroticized foot, revealed to be artificial and detachable, is a joke on the spectator; the body fragment becomes just that, leaving empty space behind its phallic presence. Likewise, the disappearing woman, "contained" in a domestic frame, seems to escape between frames.

The fetish is repeated, something that can be contained, like a photograph,



*Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* (1970)



*Bricolage* (1984)

where the absent referent (lost to history) can be at once recognized and misrecognized (disavowed). The disavowal of the photograph, for Christian Metz, is a disavowal of the absence of the referent, its loss in time, the past tense of its presence. "Film is more capable of playing of fetishism, photography more capable of itself becoming a fetish."<sup>13</sup> Rimmer's practice of looping found footage is perhaps a transposition of photographic fetishism to the cinematic register, isolating fragments of narrative and movement. However, these two singular actions in which the women pull the symbolic rug out from under the imaginary fetishism of the female image, effectively splits recognition

from misrecognition with their avowal of difference.

By triumphantly shirking the narrative context of these tricky images, Rimmer parodies the "magical misogyny" of Melies with his vanishing woman. Lucy Fisher writes of Melies' films: "the rhetoric of magic is one of those disguises, one of those cultural artifacts in which the male envy of the female procreative powers is manifest."<sup>14</sup> Fischer's analysis of Melies' "vanishing woman" trick films suggests that, taken out of the context of Melies' (and Bergman's) filmmaker-as-magician narrative context, we have here a surfacing of another form of power: that of reproduction.



Reproduction is, after all, a biological term. For Freud, instinctual repetition derives from a desire to return to an originary state of being, pre-Oedipal and ultimately pre-natal. Harnessing this desire is a key to the psychoanalytic method of returning to moments in personal history.<sup>15</sup> The mother and the womb are thus figured as the 'parental' basis of reproduction, while the fetish is the vehicle for the repeated disavowal of the parental memory. (This is what Lacan alludes to in his distinction between reproduction and repetition quoted earlier.)

In much of the critical literature on Rimmer's early films, the found footage, such as the factory scene in *Variations*, is referred to as the "parent" footage. *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970) is perhaps the best example of the historical relationship that is constructed between parent and "offspring."<sup>16</sup> In this film five feet of found footage are expanded into nine minutes through the use of freeze frames and dissolves which retard the original movement. The single image is of a barge on a river with the London skyline behind it and something else, something indecipherable, something that looks like a gunship in the foreground. As the barge passes this object, the increments of its movement are marked by particles of dust and scratches that literally "surface on" each frame as it is fixed and then dissolved into the next one.

History is figured on both the level of the signifier in *Surfacing* insofar as the film stock is itself "old," displayed frame by frame for another, newer, audience, and on the level of the referent, the suggestion of British Imperialism and its "parental" relationship to Canada. *Surfacing* is thus an expression of the hermeneutics of historical knowledge, the past being reproduced from an explicitly present perspective. The photographic properties, however, of the image of the boats and the London skyline are belied by the movement that is perceived, literally, between frames, a movement that is indexically related to the movement of the referent. The image belongs to the past, but the movement occurs in the present: it is reproduced, not simply repeated. The film does have a profound relationship to photography in its use of fixed frames, but the analysis of movement cannot be accounted for by the parallels it bears with photography.

Reproduction, in Walter Benjamin's sense, involves a memory of the aura of the original and thus embodies an historical relationship. Although Benjamin

describes film in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" as having eclipsed this notion of aura, in "A Short History of Photography" he describes the photograph as encouraging us to search for the "long-forgotten moment [in which] the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it."<sup>17</sup> It is this indexical relationship between signifier and historical referent that is restored to film through Rimmer's rephotography of found film footage.

And yet, this material is inevitably repeated by Rimmer. Repetition in the form of loops is a "demand for the new"<sup>18</sup> in its incorporation of reproduction and allegory. Paul de Man points out that "The meaning constituted by the allegorical sense . . . consists only in the repetition . . . of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority."<sup>19</sup> For Benjamin, the illusion of novelty is the quintessence of false consciousness until, or unless, it is perceived allegorically, as a commodity lacking its use-value.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, an action, separated from its narrative, is alienated from its meaning and becomes *écriture*; it is allegorical in the sense that its signified content lies elsewhere, in another movie in another time.

Moreover, through the repetition of an action (such as the window-breaking in *Bricolage*), the illusion of infinite sameness is belied by a fragmented temporality that demonstrates a "multiplicity of times."<sup>21</sup> For Stephen Heath, this is something quite different from the notion of duration which informs much of the discussion of structural-materialist film.<sup>22</sup> Heath alludes to the status of the referent in this mode of film practice as that which is supposed to be "forgotten" but which in fact acquires a "veritable intensity of meaning" through its minimalization.<sup>23</sup> This is a central means by which structural film and the discourse generated by it "covers over questions of history," the history of the subject, as Heath would have it, but also the history of the referent. Rimmer's films might be described as a return of the repressed of structural film.

Issues of sexuality, representation and history are also addressed in the 15-minute film *As Seen on TV*. The autonomous movements and gestures which comprise this film are not looped or reduced to component frames, but in keeping with their video sources, subject to various forms of image processing. Movements advance, are retarded, advance a little more, are retarded and

so on, in a dialectic of forward, reversed and stopped time in which the continuity of the movement is nevertheless preserved. Scan lines periodically traverse the screen vertically and a couple of sequences are framed in a way that includes the boundaries of the monitor. Thus, the sequence of disjunct found images that also characterizes *Bricolage* is here specifically designated as a televisual flow.

The first and last images of *As Seen on TV* are of the "Toni Twins," two identical women advertising a hair permanent product, although the image is so distorted that it is hard to tell what they're doing/selling unless one recognizes the source. The women's hairdos and dresses are in the style of the early '60s, and their movements are closely synchronized. These movements are slowed down and repeated while electronic muzak, equally distorted, emphasizes the ephemeral quality of the image. The most striking thing about these sequences is the play of looks which survives Rimmer's treatment of the original footage. In their appearance in the middle of the film the women seem to be wiping a sheet of glass that stands between them and the camera, after which they look at each other with big smiles. The film opens and closes with these two women looking out at the camera, at us, but of course not at us. We are not the audience that might have bought this product. It is as if they were looking out from an historical space in which they are trapped and we have the privilege of meeting their distant gaze.

For Benjamin, the perception of aura involves the investment of an object "with the ability to look at us in return." Baudelaire's description of eyes that "have lost their ability to look" are, in Benjamin's reading, central to his representation of modernity. The unfocused or "faraway" gaze is a gesture of reaching into the past, a correspondence of past and present in which history is registered as loss. This is precisely the effect of Rimmer's use of found footage. The signifier is, as we know, only an object, a piece of celluloid, and yet, here, it looks at us.

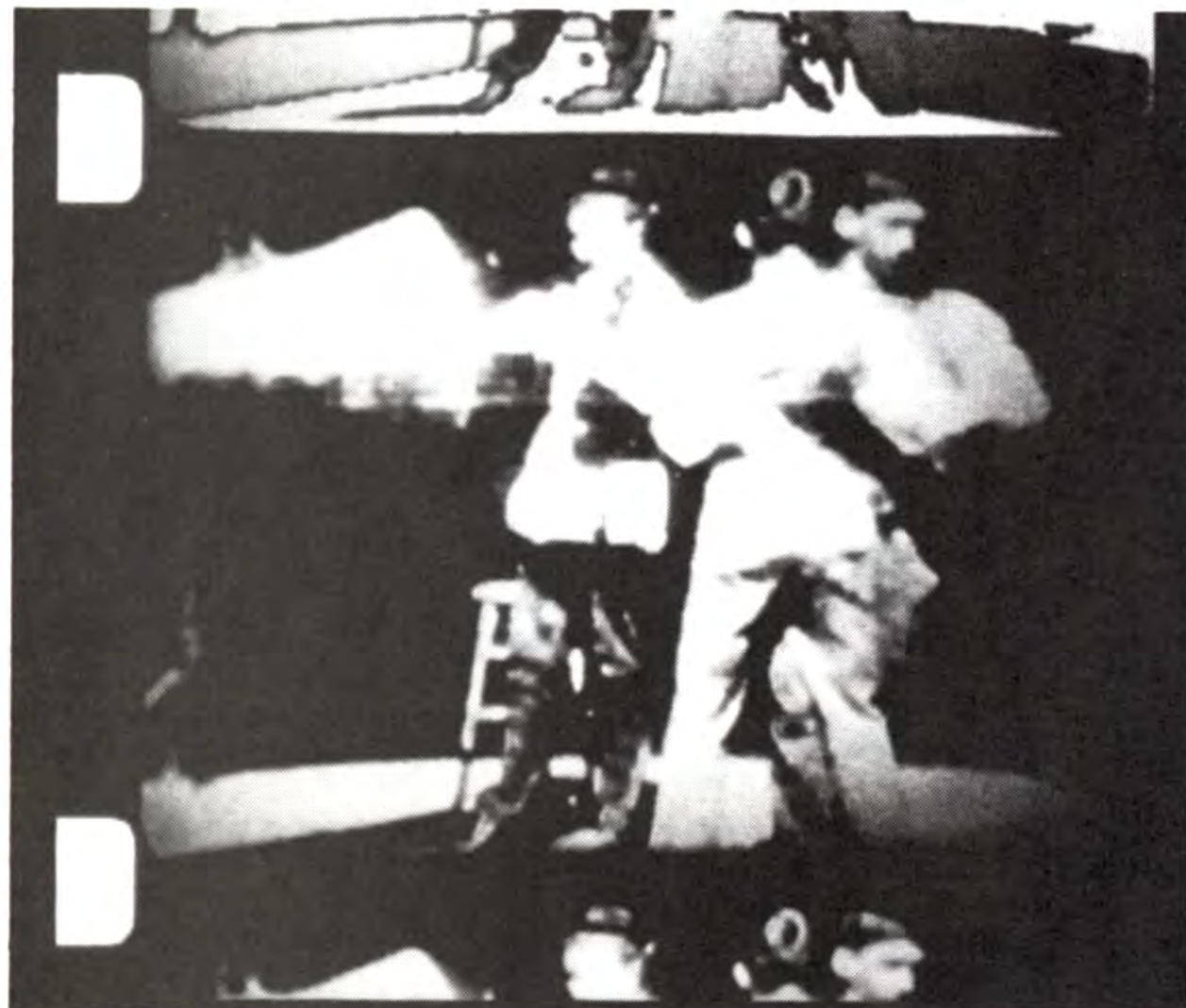
Crucial to *As Seen on TV* is an image of a naked man lying horizontally, apparently masturbating, framed in a space that looks almost like a TV monitor. The orange and blue tones of the image, the video noise and ominous audio track, plus the figure's apparent fatigue and impotence make this an extremely powerful image. It is repeated four times in the course of the film, strategically placed within the bricolage of



diverse fragments of found footage. There is a sense in which this image is a cliché of desensitized video culture, the monitor a virtual fish-tank of alienation and annulled desire. And yet it stands out by virtue of its ahistorical source.<sup>24</sup>

The other images are peculiar, but they are, for the most part, performances and include production codes that point to their status as having been "found." Like *Bricolage*, this imagery is for the most part designated as 'spectacle' in its direct address or incorporation of genre conventions. It includes a shot of a man kissing a woman taken from a black and white film, a bizarre dance

animating this presence with subjectivity. Most of Rimmer's dispossessed loops restore that ambivalence of photographic loss and preservations to what might be called "photographs of movement." In the case of *As Seen on TV*, these are culled from the even more "live" source of broadcast TV, caught and preserved as dead and gone in an avant-garde film. But the images of the naked man give a "semblance of life" back to the dead in a very different manner. He seems unable to die, and is trapped within the temporality of desire as the imaginary antithesis of the allegories that make up the rest of the film.



### ***As Seen on T.V.* (1986)**

sequence featuring long rows of women holding enormous bananas, a man jumping through a burning hoop, two men dancing together, and a man trying to touch the breasts of a slowly gyrating dancer.

The naked man, however, places us in an uncomfortable voyeuristic position, partly because, unlike the other images, it is not a performance but a private action. The fact that our look is not acknowledged and the fact that we cannot place this image come together in its ahistoricism. The other fragments, such as the ones of the Toni Twins, embody an historical difference which, like the photograph, "suppress from their own appearance the primary marks of 'livingness,' and nevertheless conserves the convincing print of the object: a past presence,"<sup>25</sup> the play of looks further

The rephotography of videos images onto film in *As Seen on TV* has the further effect of eliminating the anonymity and instantaneity of television image production, and asserting a subject of vision associated with both projector and auteur. If a film practice such as Rimmer's is to be understood as a hermeneutic enterprise, the place of the subject of vision and of knowledge has to be acknowledged on some level. Rimmer takes this paradoxical relocation of subjectivity one step further in *Along the Road to Altamira* in which the explicit nature of the rephotography, which includes even the sound of the projector, as well as the extensive use of his own images rather than those of other people, reintroduces the problem of the subject within the tenets of structural/materialist film.

The representation of history and the history of representation are central tropes of *Along the Road to Altamira*. The only found footage in this film is a super-8 projection of the interior of the caves at Altamira, in which prehistoric cave drawings are barely visible. An unsubtitled German voice-over, presumably from the same documentary source as the images, narrates the original discovery of these images. The bulk of Rimmer's film, however, involves fixed shots, lateral pans and stroboscopic images of contemporary Europe. A pile of postcards of a single city, stacked in rapid succession under an animation camera, encapsulates the fragmentary vision of the tourists who we hear babbling in muffled tones periodically through the film.

If the tourist is already hopelessly distanced from that which he or she portends to engage with, Rimmer represents that experience and at the same time the longing for a mastery of history that motivates tourism. Images of this desire include the recurring centrality of the hill-shaped city topped by a church spire that reappears in the pile of postcards, as well as the dark recess of the cave in the super-8 film, the mysterious authority of a traffic cop gesturing in an unknown language and the long fixed shot of a towering crucifix, all of which are given to us at a fixed distance. When the unstable flickering longshots of the tenements and houses are cut into in close-up, the imagery remains unstable, strobified and indecipherable. The film's compositions and techniques demonstrate an impossible desire for knowledge of this 'other' culture and its history.

In *Along the Road* the formal tropes of structural materialist film are placed in the service of the footage Rimmer shot in Spain. The structural difference of photographic representation is played out in all its parameters of off and on-screen space, observer and observed and past and present. And yet the soundtrack is equally responsible for this dialectic, and all three paradigms are conflated in the absent figure of the tourist. The traveller's object of desire is, moreover, a cave which is represented at the beginning of the film as a deep black recess into which the camera zooms, and at the end of the film, as a flat wall with prehistoric representations scratched on its surface.

The linear trajectory of *Along the Road* is strategically undermined by the closing return to the cave. If the principle of return in Freud's death drive is, as



Lacan suggests, an impossibility that is taken up in language's mimicking of reproduction, here it is explicitly so in the final image of the film of the cave drawing. The prehistoric signifier is almost indistinguishable from the bluish shades of the cave wall, while it is the super-8 film which is actually repeated. In this chain of signifiers, the past is situated at a distance which is at once spatial and epistemological.

Of the various tenets of photographic epistemology that Elder has described, the difference between past and present tense is most important in Rimmer's films. The repetitions of these movements and looks belong to the strategies of duration that characterize structural film, registering the present tense, the time of viewing, as "a multiplicity of times," a temporality that is extended to the historiographic sense of the found footage as coming from a different, other, time.

"The more things change, the more they stay the same," intoned after the last image of *Bricolage* has faded to black, is an extremely rare instance of spoken language among Rimmer's films. It is significant that it is an expression of historiography, pointing to the dialectic between repetition and reproduction that informs these films, and yet this is a rather conservative and pessimistic view of history. In fact, the films' strategies of recombination and rephotography articulate a very different historiography. The analysis of movement in Rimmer's treatment of found footage, through its indexicality, reproduces both historical material and the distanced difference between past and present.

As such, they are truly dialectical images. As Benjamin says, "It isn't that the past casts its light on the present or the present casts its light on the past: rather, an image is that in which the past and the present moment flash into constellation."<sup>26</sup> Contra Lacan, Benjamin still holds out the possibility of reproduction in his conception of history as the image of the future. Allegory is for Benjamin a spatialization of temporality, the grafting of the new onto the ruins of the old, an expression of history that is neither teleological nor mythical.<sup>27</sup>

The referents of Rimmer's images that are framed and reframed are designated as the ruins of film history, reanimated and reproduced. *Bricolage*, in these terms, is not a film about images of women, but the women themselves who offered themselves to the camera and cannot magically disappear like

genies. If there is an apocalyptic tone to *As Seen on TV*, it is due to the loss of the sense of loss produced in its allegories. The reproduction of movement in Rimmer's treatment of found footage goes beyond repetition to "mortify," in Benjamin's words, the parent: the past and those who populated it. To see the past as dead is to see it differently, in its singularity, and is a means of challenging the mechanisms of forgetting that infest post-modern culture.

## ENDNOTES

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1. Walter Benjamin, "Theoretics of Knowledge, Theory of Progress," from the unfinished *Passagen-Werk*, in *The Philosophical Forum* Vol. XV, nos. 1-2, Fall Winter, 1983-84, p. 7.
2. Al Razutis, "David Rimmer: A Critical Analysis," *Take Two*, ed. Seth Feldman, (Toronto: Irwin, 1984) originally published by the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1980; and Blaine Allan, "David Rimmer's Surfacing on the Thames," *Cinetracts* 9 3:1 (Winter, 1980.)
3. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 370.
4. Al Razutis, p. 278.
5. R. Bruce Elder, "All Things in Their times," *Cinetracts* 17; "Image: Representation and Object — The Photographic Image in Canadian Avant-Garde Film," in *Take Two*, op. cit.
6. In Elder's case postmodernism is implied in his larger project of designating the Canadian avant-garde preoccupation with photographic epistemology as postmodern. For Razutis, postmodernism refers to the historical genesis of Rimmer's aesthetics in the rejection of institutionalized modernism in the 1960s. For both critics, writing in 1982 and 1980 respectively, the "postmodern" appellation serves as a rhetorical means of valorizing some films, including Rimmer's, over other, primarily American, avant-garde practices.
7. Besides *Variations* these include: *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970), *The Dance* (1970), *Seashore* (1971) and *Watching for the Queen* (1973).
8. Frederick Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146, (July-August, 1984), p. 66.
9. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, (Norton, 1973), p. 50.
10. Paul Arthur, "Intertextuality and/as History: The Case of the Straubs' Schoenberg Film," paper delivered at the Florida State University 13th Conference on Comparative Literature, Tallahassee, January 1988.
11. See Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting* (London: Vision Press, 1929). Actually, the brick analogy is Eisenstein's characterization of Pudovkin's theory of montage and that of the Kuleshov school's in general, against which he advocates his own theory of dialectical montage: "Linkage — P and Collision — E" (*Film Form* ed. and Trans. Jay Leyda, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 37. In this context, Rimmer's use of the brick analogy is somewhat ironic as his montage principles of disjunction are much closer to Eisenstein's conception of the collision of autonomous units.
12. Although the sequence is not repeated, this motion of handing-over the leg is momentarily reversed, delayed and replayed.
13. Christian Metz, "Photography and Fetish," *October* 34, p. 90.
14. Lucy Fischer, "The Lady Vanishes: Women, Magic and the Movies," *Film Before Griffith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 349.
15. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pp. 48-49.
16. Allan, p. 57.
17. Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," *Screen* v. 13 (Spring 1972), p. 7.
18. Lacan, p. 61.
19. Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle eds., (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), p. 210.
20. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* trans. Harry Zohn, (London: NLB, 1976), p. 172.
21. Stephen Heath, "Repetition Time: Notes Around Structural Materialist Film," in *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1983), p. 167. Heath cites Lacan in his discussion of repetition: "Everything which varies, modulates in repetition is only an alienation of its meaning." (*FFC*, p. 61.)
22. Heath is concerned to shift the discussion of structural-materialist film from notions of duration as identity to a sense of temporal difference. For Heath this pertains to the viewing subject, who is not the same from one moment to the next and is therefore put in process by any film, including this kind of film. However, I am concerned with the difference between original, historical viewers and second, present viewers, for which I should also cite Benjamin's critique of the Bergsonian conception of *la duree* in his essays on Baudelaire. (op. cit., pp. 144-45.)
23. Heath, p. 174.
24. Rimmer has identified the image of the naked man as an epileptic seizure that he did in fact tape off the air, from a documentary source.
25. Metz, op. cit., pp. 84-85. Metz's argument is based in a fairly familiar designation of photography as "mortal" and film as a disavowal of the stasis and sense of loss of its photographic base (familiar, in its different versions, from Sontag and Barthes).
26. Benjamin, "Theoretics," p. 8.
27. Benjamin's most thorough discussion of allegory can be found in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* (NLB, 1967), although he also describes Baudelaire as possessing the allegorist's gaze: "As spleen he shatters the ideal. But it is precisely the modern which always conjures up prehistory." *Charles Baudelaire*, p. 171.





## TOWARDS A CANADIAN (INTER)NATIONAL CINEMA

(part 1 of a 2-part article)

by Robin Wood

The main impulse behind this article is simply the desire to celebrate the achievement of two recent Canadian films — Anne Wheeler's *Loyalties* and William McGillivray's *Life Classes* — which I have come to admire and love. To provide a context for this celebration, however, I want to begin by taking up some of the issues of national culture, American cultural imperialism, the definition of Canadian national identity, that have haunted (indeed dominated) most writing on Canadian films by Canadians since the '60s.

### THE MYTH OF CANADIAN IDENTITY

The search for a 'Canadian identity' clearly distinguishable from the overwhelmingly potent national identity of the United States seems to me doomed to failure from the outset. A national identity is defined, inevitably, not by the wish of intellectuals to construct one but by the economic base and the social/political structure that it determines. Canada shares with the United States *both* an economic base *and*, by and large, a social/political superstructure ('capitalism' and 'patriarchy' remain necessary terms in defining these): differences, such as these are, are purely a matter of local variation. Given the overwhelming power and close proximity of the US, there is no hope whatever of constructing a Cana-



dian identity of any efficacy *unless it be one of radical opposition* (i.e. Marxist and feminist). This would of course not be in any real sense peculiarly Canadian: it would exist alongside the struggles of Marxist and feminist groups throughout the world, and could probably only develop in conjunction with such movements within the US itself. There is depressingly little sign of the effective growth of such a movement within the present social/political climate, but the theoretical basis for it is stronger now than it has ever been, and that basis could be activated by any number of practical developments within the social/political/economic spheres, hopefully arousing intellectuals from their postmodernist inertia.

I have put forward these arguments before, and their cogency is I think confirmed by the fact that they have been consistently ignored by apologists for the development of a Canadian cultural identity: they can't refute them, but to accept them could be necessarily to abandon the climerical pursuits so dear to their hearts. The arguments explain, in any case, why attempts at definition of this cultural identity (whether conceived of as actual or embryonic) are always couched in negative terms: the Canadian national character is less confident, less assured, more tentative, more uncertain, less convinced, etc. A national character founded upon declarations of impotence is not going to carry anyone very far.

A Marxist democracy (that is to say, a democracy that was *genuinely* government by the people, of the people and for the people, not government by the rich and for the rich or government by men of women) — a democracy built upon progressive decentralization, popular participation, genuine and not specious equality, and the development of autonomous communities, in which the media were no longer dominated by capital — would actually enable the emergence of cultural particularities, developing all that is valuable in a given cultural tradition without developing overtones of competitive nationalism. And please don't tell me that that is not what happened in Soviet Russia. We are not *talking* about Soviet Russia: at least, not about Soviet Russia since around 1930, the historical moment marked by the death of Lenin, the expulsion of Trotsky, and the triumph of Stalinism. I am by no means antagonistic to the preservation and development of a national culture, so long as that project is free from all taint of aggressive nationalism and does not conflict with

the international priorities I have outlined. The question remains as to whether there is a vital Canadian national tradition there to pressure and develop. Both *Loyalties* and *Life Classes* suggest that there isn't — the latter film's concern with preserving links with the past being an entirely different matter.

## THE GREAT CANADIAN FILM RENAISSANCE

**T**he world already knows that we are currently in the midst of a Great Canadian Film Renaissance. It consists, apparently, of three films, *Decline of the American Empire*, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, and *Un Zoo, La Nuit*. These receive standing ovations at international film festivals, and everyone is now looking for Canadian movies. They appear to be looking in the wrong places. But before I briefly consider these three acclaimed masterpieces, it seems pertinent to remind readers of a very similar phenomenon, the Great Australian Film Renaissance of roughly a decade ago.

When I first came to Canada in 1977, people concerned about the development (or lack of it) of the Canadian cinema were looking enviously at the GAFR and saying, 'Why can't something like that happen in Canada?' Today, of course, it is clear that the GAFR was a matter of province rather than achievement, and the promise has remained conspicuously unfulfilled. To account for this failure fully and responsibly would require a thorough analysis of shifting cultural, economic and industrial conditions which I am not equipped to offer. My point here is simply that the excitement over this 'renaissance' now looks absurdly premature. For what, in fact, is now worth salvaging? Aside from the work of Paul Cox (to which I shall return to in a moment), a small group of early works by Bruce Beresford — *Don's Party*, *The Getting of Wisdom*, *Puberty Blues*: flawed, often rather awkward, minor works whose interest derives almost entirely from their strong feminist thrust. There is also Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, and, I suppose, Gillian Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career*, a film whose feminism strikes me as too facile and simple-minded to be of much interest.

The progress (if that is the word) of Beresford's career (and there are obvious parallels in that of Schepisi's and of the New Zealander Roger Donaldson's, who once made *Smash*

*Palace* and recently made *No Way Out*) is depressingly eloquent: motivated, presumably, by worsening conditions of production in Australia, the achievement of international recognition (with, somewhat ominously, *Breaker Morant*, a 'protest movie' set conveniently in the past, with 'beautiful photography,' i.e. scenery — the kind of movie lapped up by liberals who enjoy feeling righteously indignant about anything except what is actually happening around them), and the lure of American dollars, he moves to Hollywood, where this feminist-oriented director first makes *Tender Mercies*, a typical '80s 'restoration of the father-figure at the women's expense' movie (again with 'beautiful photography'), and later *Crimes of the Heart*, a shameless celebration of the masculinist myth that women are naturally stupid, hysterical and helpless (the fact that it was written by a woman is scarcely a mitigating factor). What is important, however, is not to castigate Beresford personally for what looks like cynical opportunism, but to recognize once again that the minor talent is almost invariably dependent upon favourable soil and favourable climatic conditions for its growth and flourishing (the *major* talent — the case of Shostakovich is exemplary — has the inner strength to struggle on against conditions enormously more discouraging than Beresford can ever have dreamed of). The favourable soil and climate can take two forms: either a strong and highly developed tradition supplying a complex and flexible set of conventions (as with, for example, the Elizabethan drama, the Vienna of Mozart and Haydn, or the classical Hollywood cinema), or a powerful social/political movement such as produced in the Québécois cinema of the '60s — early '70s. Of the Great Australian Film Renaissance there now seems nothing left except the work of Paul Cox, an interesting and distinctive minor talent obstinately pursuing the personal obsessions that continue to energize his films but which have also set him quite apart from the general tendencies of the Australian cinema.

One may be wrong, however. It is perfectly possible — and the parallel with Canada brings this home — that there are admirable Australian films that get little exposure at home and less abroad: an Australian *Loyalties*, an Australian *Life Classes*, honest, intelligent and 'authentic' films that have got lost in the rush to promote the latest in the trendy and the chic. If so, one would like to hear about them.

It will be clear already that I have no



more confidence in a Great Canadian Film Renaissance, or even in the *possibility* of one in the immediately foreseeable future. None of the three films (and I suppose one should add, reluctantly, the supremely embarrassing *A Winter Tan*, because of its *succès de scandale*) that would appear to constitute the present one, seems to me to merit detailed attention. *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* is clearly negligible, its standing ovations, etc., accountable for only in terms of the current (or now already *passé*?) fashionability of Canadian movies in international festivals. It is also, in its apparently modest way, a calculated audience-pleaser, flattering and never challenging the spectator. We are encouraged to identify with Polly (Sheila McCarthy) while at the same time feeling comfortably superior to her ('the delightful silly schmuck' about sums up the attitude). Her lesbianism is never in the least threatening, largely because she herself appears not to wish to put it into practice. The alternative to her 'lovable' inferiority and confusion is an active lesbian who also 'happens' (in the way convenient to narratives that do not wish to upset anyone) to be treacherous, manipulative and exploitive. The moral seems to be: it's fine to be a lesbian provided you are also (a) totally asexual and (b) insufferably 'cute' — a message with which bourgeois audiences should have few problems.

In itself, *Mermaids* scarcely deserves attack ('Who breaks a butterfly upon a wheel?'); it is not Rozema's fault that an essentially unassuming, frail little movie briefly achieved an inflated reputation. The same cannot be said of the other three films which, in their different ways, seem positively to clamour for attention, whether on grounds of pretensions to intellectual authority (*Decline of the American Empire*) or to 'shocking' audacity (all three).

*Decline of the American Empire* is the ideal movie for jaded '80s intellectuals: the enthusiastic welcome it has been accorded is perfectly logical, and a sufficiently damning comment on the era in which we live. The film does not lack potential, and actually achieves (in its last half hour, for anyone with the stamina to sit out the preceding 90 minutes of relentless smartass audience titillation) a few surprisingly touching moments after the sudden shift of tone that comes with nightfall: the insight, for example, that the film's gay character is the only male that the woman can turn to for compassion and understanding in time of distress. A certain com-

plexity of effect arises from the fact that the two women who emerge as the film's most sympathetic characters embody directly opposite positions: the most 'progressive' and the most conservative. A positive account of the film would depend upon the degree to which one feels it is redeemed by the shift of tone and the new perspective it brings; and on the degree to which one feels that its project can be convincingly defined as the exposure of the sickening complacency and presumption of the 'typical' heterosexual male academic.

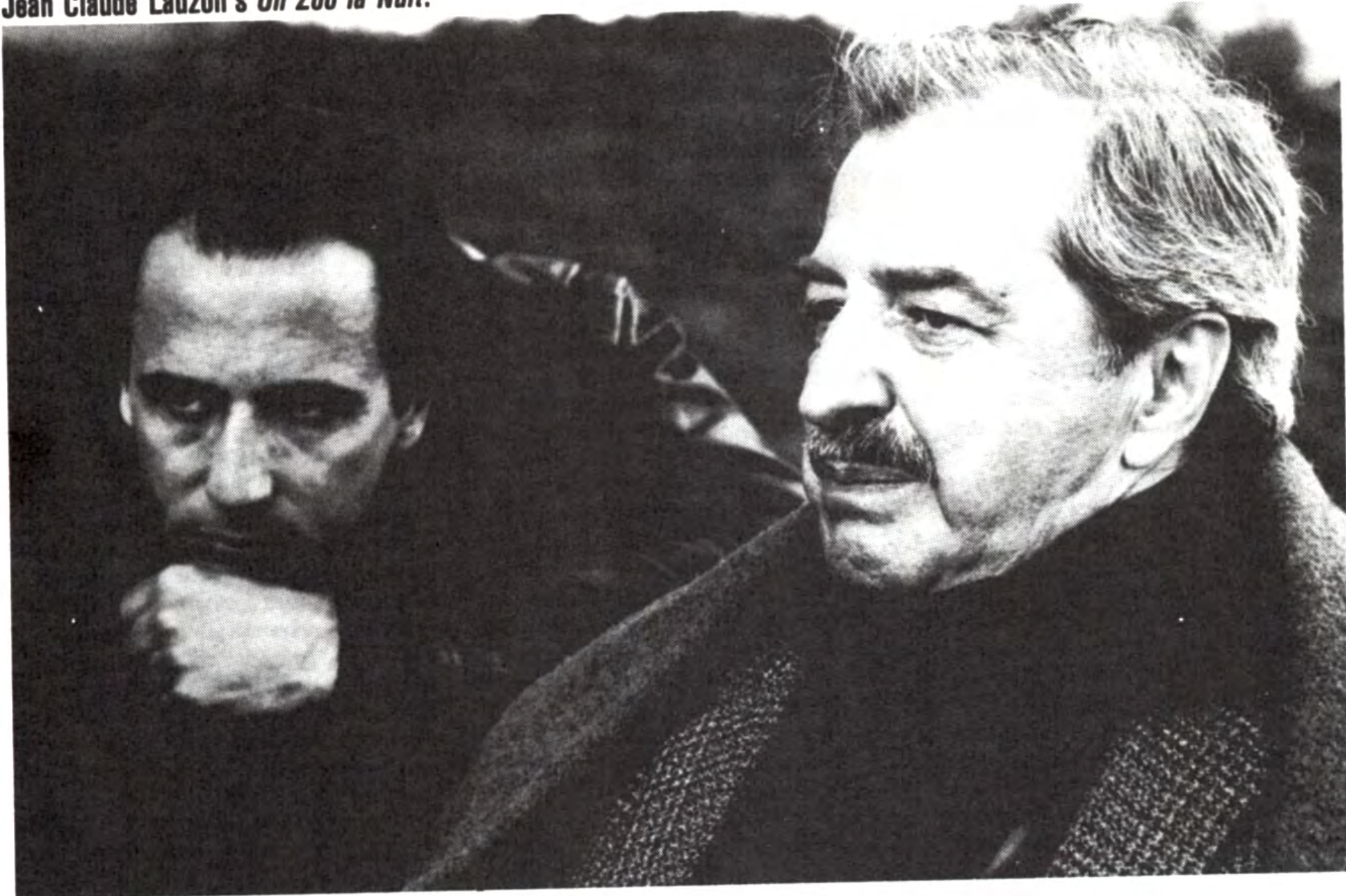
Such an account, however, could only appear adequate if one ignored the film's *major* project. One is forced to take seriously its explicit thesis of the irremediable decline and fall of our civilisation, and to take the thesis seriously is to accept the characters who propound it (the academics themselves) as having an authority, wisdom and status that nothing in the film justifies. The film shows its group of academics to be thoroughly insulated, isolated, self-absorbed, imaginatively constricted, obsessed with sex not as a crucial means of human communication but as a means of bolstering the ego; but it also offers them as adequate spokespersons for its world view. One has finally to assume Arcand's complicity with his characters (they are never effectively 'placed' by any reference beyond them, the one outsider remaining undeveloped). One comes to suspect, even, that the extreme distaste the film generates for its leading male characters is not shared by its writer-director. Its complacent despair (a certain brand of despair can be downright smug) involves a necessary corollary: the casual dismissal, in a couple of sentences, of both Marx and Freud, hence of any possibility of an alternative analysis, diagnosis and remedy. Marxist revolution is apparently *passé*, in the spirit and wisdom of the postmodern ethos; the writings of Freud — for all their flaws and limitations, arguably the finest single body of work produced in the West over the last hundred years — can be discredited simply by the assertion that their author was merely a repressed homosexual. Having disposed so glibly (and fashionably) of any constructive alternatives, the film can smugly relish its own pessimism undisturbed, and pass on to intellectuals in the audience the comforting reflection that there is really no point in fighting for anything any more.

*Un Zoo, la Nuit* certainly has its interest, if predominantly as a 'case.' For a first feature, it is amazingly assured; it's

also a film that is not easy to forget, however hard one might wish to. Its fusion of an intense, obviously personal, urgency with a mastery of, and readiness to work through, the conventions of a continuously fruitful and still vital and usable American genre (*film noir*) must be regarded, in principle, as promising. What is dismaying, however, is not the principle but the accomplished fact, the personal urgency taking the form of a totally unselfcritical indulgence in the realization of infantile fantasy (how else can one describe the protagonist's project of helping his father to slaughter an elephant?). The project of 'restoring the father' has of course become a cliché of '80s Hollywood cinema, but it is inflected here with an intensity and morbidity that transform it into something highly idiosyncratic. It seems not to have occurred to Lauzon — the assurance overriding and obliterating any sense of even the slightest qualms — that the climactic sequence (the scene that, on the literal level, gives the film its title) might be found not only supremely distasteful but also downright stupid. Critics have expressed difficulty in making sense of the relationship between the film's two halves, but it is surely perfectly logical, psychoanalytically at least: the drive to reinstate the father has as its corollary the expression of the most virulent homophobia, the virulence hardly mitigated by the feebly ambiguous hints (perhaps the film's only sign of uneasiness at its project) that the hero's friend might also be gay (as well as his sadistic gangster-adversary). It is clearly significant that the hero's drive to reassert allegiance to his father takes a markedly physical form: such a drive is profoundly if implicitly homosexual, demanding the *explicit* repudiation of homosexuality as its necessary alibi. The final scene, in which the hero ritualistically embraces his father's dead and naked body, is surely unique in its morbid fusion of incest, homosexuality and necrophobia: it has to be seen to be believed.

The pity about *A Winter Tan* is its waste or misuse of potentially superb material. That material has two components: the letters of Maryse Holder, and that splendid performer Jackie Burroughs. Neither of these, however, can simply be thrust naked (as it were) at the audience; both, if their potential is to be realized, require two conditions — distance and context — and the film provides neither. Supposedly the idea was that the letters are so eloquent that they should be left to 'speak for themselves,'





leaving judgement and conclusions to the spectator; in practice this amounts merely to an evasion of the delicate but indispensable task of defining a coherent attitude to them and their writer. But *A Winter Tan* is in effect less a film about Maryse Holder than a showcase for a *tour de force* of bravura histrionics: Burroughs has been permitted (or has permitted herself, as she is a member of the directorial collective) to turn the film into virtually a one-woman show, degenerating into what comes across as a desperate plea from actor to audience to 'Love me, love me, love me.' I found it embarrassing, and very hard to sit through.

Not only has the *official* Great Canadian Film Renaissance produced not a single masterpiece, its touted wares include not one film of real intelligence or distinction. Whether or not *Loyalties* and *Life Classes* quite justify the term 'masterpiece' must remain open to question, but at least its application to them does not seem patently absurd. (I am aware that the term is widely considered sexist and patriarchal. I follow here the lead of certain feminists who wish to purge language of sexist bias by the simple expedient of eliminating the feminine derivatives of nouns and using the

root form impartially for both sexes: if Ingrid Bergman can be an 'actor' I don't see why Anne Wheeler cannot be a 'master.' The word need not imply oppression, as in 'master race' or 'master and slave,' but simply indicate that 'mastery' of materials and means that is a prerequisite of all significant art).

#### A NOTE ON ATOM EGOYAN

**A**m I suggesting, then, that from beneath the ruins of the Great Canadian Film Renaissance there are only two films worth salvaging? Not quite. There is one filmmaker who has attracted a degree of the more serious, less fashion-addicted critical attention and whose career certainly deserves respectful attention: Atom Egoyan. Egoyan's films are dealt with in detail in Cameron Bailey's article in this issue; I offer here only the most cursory of notes, very tentatively, as I am still not confident of my position. *Next of Kin* is a very pleasing, sympathetic first movie; *Family Viewing* is clearly a lot more than that (after the three viewings I still don't feel entirely comfortable relating to it, or confident of my ability to form a responsible judgement).

Egoyan belongs to a certain cinematic tradition for which I feel respect (it has produced some remarkable work) combined with a degree of distrust: the cinema of personal confession/obsession, effectively established in the late '50s/early '60s by the advent on the international scene of Bergman and Fellini (and, somewhat less obviously, Antonioni). There were, of course, precedents, for example Orson Welles who, while still in his twenties, produced in *Citizen Kane* the definitive autobiography of his own decline and fall. The distrust arises from a sense that personal obsession (while valuable, perhaps even to a certain degree indispensable for the production of major art) is not in itself sufficient nourishment to sustain a career. Bergman is a partial and intermittent exception, but think not only of Welles, Fellini and Antonioni, but of Bertolucci, Makavejev, Herzog and Wenders. One is left with a handful of consistent and impressive early works, followed by a history of uncertainty, lack of direction, half-hearted experimentation, and moves into alien cultures and the quicksands of international co-production. Wenders' touching gesture of handing over his Montreal festival award to Egoyan seems



peculiarly appropriate: even more than Wenders' early (and surely, to date, most satisfactory) films, Egoyan's first two works are variations on each other, generating already the sense of a self-enclosed personal universe. Much as I detest *Un Zoo, la Nuit*, and much as I am drawn to Egoyan's work, Lauzon's readiness to work within and through established conventions might hold, in the long run, the promise of greater staying power, greater adaptability, and the greater potential range that comes with a confident but unintimidated and uninhibited acceptance of tradition and collaboration.

The nature of the personal obsession that animates Egoyan's work to date is certainly relevant to the thesis of this article. *Loyalties* and *Life Classes* are both committedly feminist movies, hence, in the context of the '80s, strongly oppositional. (None of the four films that constitute the Great Canadian Film Renaissance can seriously be described as feminist, though three of these might seem to gesture vaguely in that direction). *Next of Kin* and *Family Viewing* might also be claimed for feminism, even though their approach to it is more oblique. The point can be made by comparison with *Life Classes*: McGillivray identifies directly and unambiguously with his central female character (though without ever forfeiting the potentialities of distance, detachment and impersonality); Egoyan identifies with a 'feminized' male protagonist (one intuitively a very close relationship between artist and character) who in turn identifies with women. Therein lies the films' strengths and their problem. To further the comparison briefly, it might be added that, while in the best sense McGillivray's film is obviously very personal (more obviously than *Loyalties*, since McGillivray establishes a personal style, an individual enunciation), he also achieves, in relation to his thematic concerns, a level of artistic impersonality, the surest mark of maturity, to which Egoyan cannot yet aspire.

The project of both Egoyan's films is virtually identical: the construction of an 'alternative' family — alternative, that is, to the patriarchal, biological, nuclear family, the model that still dominates our culture. *Next of Kin* defines some of the conditions that might make 'Family Life' (it seems appropriate to invoke Ken Loach's film here in passing) endurable and positive: chiefly, the presence of someone who is accepted (by a hoax) as a family member yet knows that he is not one, and therefore, as simultaneously insider/outsider,

combines the sympathy and distance that together enable him to analyse family problems and dissolve familial tensions. It is a little difficult to determine what, beyond the terms of its narrative, the film is saying: the redemptive conditions scarcely lend themselves to easy duplication. The film seems committed to biological family ties (though its protagonist's commitment to salvaging a family that is on the point of break-up) yet, equally committed to the notion that a non-biological family would work much better (the protagonist's project is not altruistic, he is constructing this family, of which he is *not* a biological member, for himself). If the family as we know it, is redeemable only through a hoax that depends, in its turn, on peculiar and unreproducible coinci-

cribed the male protagonists as 'feminized,' in the sense in which our culture generally defines femininity (they are gentle, caring, unaggressive, passive in surface characteristics if not in the pursuit of their aim); another word might be 'asexual.' It is as if, motivated single-mindedly by their desire for a family in which they can function as offspring, not patriarch, they must of necessity remain sexually undefined; or as if, identifying with women, they cannot also be sexually attracted to them. The films also refuse the alternative logical possibility, that the male protagonists are gay (a possibility that is never actually denied, but also never suggested). It can certainly be argued that sexuality is not the be-all and end-all of human existence and that our culture is inordi-



### *Family Viewing*

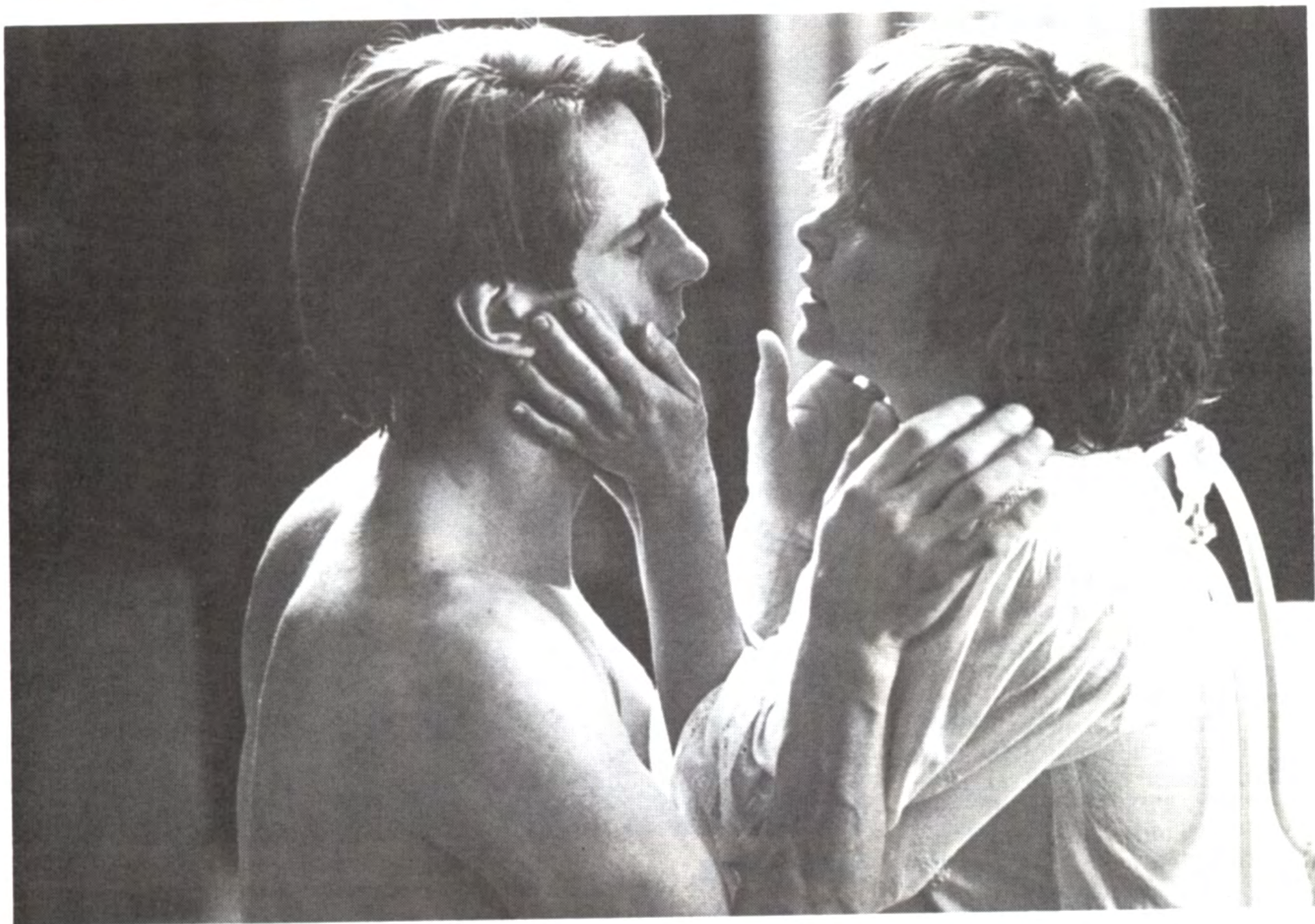
dence, then it is not redeemable at all: the logic of the film seems to point to the rejection of the biological nuclear family altogether. The harsher, colder, much less ingratiating but vastly more ambiguous *Family Viewing* appears to reinstate biological allegiances (at least through the female line) while rejecting patriarchy: here the 'feminized' male protagonist's project is to (re-construct) around himself a family of women, the father (redeemable in *Next of Kin*) here regarded as a totally disruptive, egoistic and alien figure on whose exclusion from the group the realization of the project depends.

In both films, the movement of the narrative appears to demand a curious and significant suppression. I have des-

nately and unhealthily obsessed with it. Yet the very fact that so much emphasis is placed on it surely means that the issue cannot, in art that aspires to any cultural centrality, be simply ignored or sidestepped, and I think this amounts to a serious blockage (or erosion) in Egoyan's work so far. Nonetheless, the film's project of rescuing the family from patriarchy remains intriguing and attractive, and *Family Viewing* is an important, serious, engaging and difficult work. Yet it strikes me, in the last resort, as intricate rather than genuinely complex: it does not have the richness nor the emotional generosity that I find in both *Loyalties* and *Life Classes*, a detailed examination of which will follow in the next issue. □



# DEAD RINGERS



## THE JOKE'S ON US

Jeremy Irons and Genevieve Bujold in *Dead Ringers*.



David Cronenberg has attained at last almost unanimous critical acclaim from virtually every major North American mainstream critic. More surprising is the support the film has received from left of centre papers like *The Village Voice*. Most astonishing is the unmitigated endorsement it has been given from feminist critics like Amy Taubin and Katherine Dieckmann of *The Voice*. Given the low profile of this country's national film culture, Canadians are proud, understandably, of a Toronto-based director who has finally come of age, achieving international recognition as an 'auteur' who has produced an undeniably sleek product. The latest shower of accolades heaped on *Dead Ringers* took place at the tenth anniversary of the Canadian Genie awards ceremony. The film won a total of 10 awards including the most prestigious: best picture, best director, best actor, best adapted screenplay, etc., etc. (Ironically, of the films competing in the major categories, *Dead Ringers* is the least 'Canadian' in terms of the participants involved.) *Dead Ringers* is, unquestionably, impressive — it boldly takes on a complex of social and cultural issues that are at the forefront of theoretical chic: the body as site of horror and the grotesque, the appropriation of the body as a declaration of power and control, suspicions surrounding the sacral omnipotence of the medical profession, etc. These are dressed within a sophisticated, controlled style of filmmaking which heightens and validates the significance of what the film appears to take on. The stylized ritualistic presentation of the *mise-en-scène* — the much commented upon cardinal red ceremonious robes of the operating surgeons, the cold blue and steel sombre tones of the Mantle twins' (Jeremy Irons portraying both twins Eli and Bev) designer-perfect condo, the earthy traditionalism of Claire Niveau's/Geneviève Bujold's Rosedale apartment, the technical virtuosity demanded of a film where one actor is playing both lead parts, the sustained long takes and lingering dissolves — confirms the director's mastery over his medium. (J. Hoberman, in his enthusiastic response to the film in *The Voice*, invokes Fritz Lang's films as a comparison. *The Village Voice*, January 3, 1989, p. 55) All of this accounts for the film's inclusion in many lists of the years' 10 best; however, none of this explains the willingness on the part of politically conscious writers to endorse the most offensive misogynist product to emerge in quite a while. Ms. Taubin warns against this kind of "misinterpretation." "Many will find Cronenberg's dismantling of an honoured (though always slightly suspect) patriarchal profession intolerable. (It's mostly women who've been laughing at the previews.) Others will mistake the critique of misogyny for the thing itself" (*The Village Voice*, September 27, 1988, p. 68).

This seems a most important distinction which has formed one of the mainstays of feminist film criticism. When is a film a *critique* of misogyny and when is it *complicit* with a misogynist position? One of the contentions Laura Mulvey puts forth in her seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is that directors like Hitchcock and Sternberg cater to a masculine spectator punishing the female for the castration anxieties she invokes or controlling her through the fetishistic appropriation of her body as spectacle; Cronenberg's 'tour-de-force' leaves no room for the ambiguity which has inspired continuing discussions regarding the sexual politics of Hitchcock and Sternberg's work. In addition to its subject matter, the film imparts meaning through a variety of elements often neglected in current criticism such as tone, humour, attitude and processes of empathy and identification, star presence as well as the director's domain of *mise-en-*

*scène*. The question one must explore is how can a disjuncture, as broad as the one outlined by Ms. Taubin, take place.

Among the many problems inherent in mainstream film reviewing is its mystification of the processes of reading. The reviewer's declaration of what the film is about is presented without the need to demonstrate where the assertions are validated in the film. Issues as far ranging as an obsessional love relationship, existential identity crisis, gynecological terror, explorations of human sexuality, etc. are put forth; the reading is then supported by the auteur's equivocal intentions ("This is what I was doing"), which seals the reductive analysis. Instead, the critic's responsibility should be to explore a response *within* the context of the whole work (i.e., Where did I get this idea from? Why am I responding this way?) and to identify the values which shape the reading. This inevitably leads to a discussion of valuation and pleasure. If one finds offensive films which exploit and denigrate women and have no respect for the human body, then one cannot support *Dead Ringers* as a significant work. In fact, its lustrous aesthetic polish only contributes to the film's formidable achievement in its indiscriminate disdain and revulsion for the human body and physical expressions of the most fundamental aspects of human interaction.

The above-mentioned thematic is essential to Cronenberg's oeuvre but hasn't previously been endorsed with the kind of unreserved adulation lavished on *Dead Ringers*. Besides the obvious technical sophistication the film displays, one can attribute the reappraisal of Cronenberg's work to the present-day social climate. Cronenberg's work is very much in line with contemporary attitudes towards sexuality, illness and physical degeneration. These obsessions are part of a social crisis triggered by the real fears of AIDS and the pressing realities of a disintegrating environment worldwide. Degenerative disease and ecological decay are fundamental to cultural consciousness yet remain marginalised in terms of any full social/political acknowledgement of the ramifications they engender. The day-to-day tensions of coping with fears of contracting and dealing with traumatic disease, of nuclear annihilation and of climatological disasters too large to control, contribute to a network of anxieties revolving around illness, death, and a fragile sense of life and continuance. Any fundamental political projects depend on hope and a vision of a future which has become increasingly problematised in the '80s. The most detrimental attitude one could adopt or indulge is that of Cronenberg's in *Dead Ringers*: the film panders to an arcane nihilism and a complex version of morbidity endorsed with abandon. *Dead Ringers* touches on issues like the hopelessness of fertility and reproduction, natural evolving mutations, degenerating illness, the barbaric underside of modern medicine, the impossibility of positive, creative love relationships, all profoundly significant to contemporary anxieties, only to exploit these concerns for a maudlin statement about the futility of the human condition.

The main trump card here used to defuse the far-ranging intellectual/philosophical quandaries the project approaches is Cronenberg's brand of humour. The double-layering of the joke acts as a built-in safeguard and distancing device for the audience, which serves to complicate the film's attitude to its subject matter. The criticism here is not against the use of humour in this context but more precisely, the film's notion of comedy — an interesting contrast would be the black satiric humour of Bunuel's work which acts as a mature and insightful commentary on the film's concerns. This brings us back to the question raised by Taubin's comment. Who's



laughing and at whose expense? Consider the opening sequence ending with the punchline "They're different than us." This loaded conclusion acts as an epilogue for what is to follow. The pre-pubescent attitude regarding female difference articulated by more sexually knowledgeable Eli as young adolescent, sets up the tone towards women which is maintained throughout the film. At issue is the kind of response being solicited to the consciousness of both twins who are presented as the film's emotional centrepiece. The film jumps from the epilogue to reintroduce the twins as young adults; they are presented as brilliant medical students who have conceived what will become the famous Mantle Retractor which later earns them an award for their revolutionary contribution to the profession of gynecology. The film clearly signals that the invention *can* be an instrument of torture when used in a live woman's body. As the supervising doctor states, "It may work on cadavers but not on humans." The film ambiguously leaves this comment hanging but sinisterly implies that the entire community of practicing gynecologists are complicit with this new form of female subjugation masquerading as a medical breakthrough. This is all, potentially, audacious had the film persisted in developing a criticism of these gender politics. What follows, however, is a retreat from the social and professional world into a subjective fantasy/nightmare which allows Cronenberg to explore an anomalous highly visceral side-show devoid of social criticism. The film's apparent objectivity towards its material (numerous critics have noted the absence of point-of-view shots and a relatively distanced camera) is not supported by its empathetic tone which remains with the brothers' positions. Throughout *Dead Ringers* the treatment of women is neither sympathetic nor generous.

The narrative proper begins in the present-day and introduces Claire Niveau who has sought out the famous Mantle clinic because of its high reputation for treating problem

cases of infertility. The spectator's orientation to Claire, a professional actress, is shaped by her self-presentation: "I've decided I want to be humiliated," "I need humiliation as well as money" and "I've been bad and I need to be punished," etc. The misogynistic implications of Claire's comments are reinforced by her identity as an unstable actress whose behaviour veers between perversity and manic depression. Soon after her introduction, Claire is seen bound to her bed with rubber hoses and sutures moaning "Doc, you're killing me . . ." Outside of the sophomoric humour, the scene is difficult to read other than as depicting a voyeuristic male fantasy with which Claire is complicit. Her construction as a female mutation with a tripartite womb who "need not think birth-control thoughts" and can never get pregnant enhances her image as a male sexual fantasy. Given this disparaging, blatantly sexist representation of a modern woman, one must take a closer look at the sleight-of-hand being effected: under the guise of a sexually open career woman of the '80s, one finds the familiar and pejorative stereotype of the nymphomaniac. This image has been classically bound to the cliché of the exhibitionistic profession of the performer whose inability to cope leads her to self-destruction. Claire, in part, feeds into this convention through her identity as a drug-addicted 'star' of a second-rate TV mini-series although the type is complicated by the casting of an actress whose star persona is at odds with the film's ideological project. Geneviève Bujold's persona contributes an intelligence, wit and knowingness that threatens to foreground the sexist conception of the character, but ultimately, is unable to counter Cronenberg's usage of her. Although Claire initially appears to be fully-realized, articulating her own 'voice,' one notices gradually that she is used arbitrarily and serves as a catalyst to develop the film's actual thematic regarding the twins' needs and problems. She is not granted an identity independent of the twins, despite a few perfunctory scenes which



**Bev's withdrawal from the outside world.**



attempt to situate her struggle to command respect and self-definition as an actress. Claire's function in the film is underlined succinctly in the scene where Eli visits her on-location; Claire, in trailer, is shot in right profile as a make-up person works on her left profile, hidden from the viewer. After the make-up artist leaves, she turns to reveal the other side of her face which is made up to look bruised and beaten. Although intended as a shock effect, the split image of Claire's face visualizes Eli's subjective vision. He has come to offer Claire a proposition that may ease the tension between the three: Eli suggests that both he and Bev share Claire as a lover and Claire's battered profile appears when she rejects the idea. Throughout the scene, Eli can hardly conceal his deep aggression towards Claire for coming between him and his brother, and usurping Bev's affections.

Despite what Bujold brings to the part, the film's project is not committed to developing the woman's story. Instead, the film melds a variety of female archetypes, depending on the needs of the central male protagonists. Claire, the sexually exciting anatomical oddity (Bev articulates this when he comments that sex with Claire is like 'fucking a mutant') is also a woman desperate to be a mother thereby fulfilling the male fantasy of female identity as mother/whore. Claire's thwarted desire to have a biological child is displaced onto her love-relationship with the feminine child-like Bev. Claire, at first associated with promiscuity and deception, is then aligned to the warm, womb-like traditional home-as-sanctuary in Rosedale, and is dressed accordingly in Victorian garb. Claire's insight and compassion combined with the warmth and comfort of her apartment offer an asylum for Bev from the outside world in which Eli dominates but the mother as saviour is quickly discredited by her abandonment of the child for her career (an overly-familiar convention of the woman's film). Having thus justified the male character's suspicions of the Woman's deceptive nature and inherent duplicity (the maternal aspect falls away conveniently and leaves the sexual being) the film can then luxuriate in its manifest project — the twins' inevitable descent into self-immolation and the complete surrender to the ultimate fantasy that situates the men as pre-sexual children, preceding the traumas imposed by the awareness of sexual difference.

The film's gradual movement towards the final operative death sequence which reaches a crescendo of mutilation and horrific violence, is reminiscent of heterosexual futile-love narratives like *Tristan and Isolde*; however, in contrast to these traditions, *Dead Ringers* never acknowledges overtly the reality that the love relationship which the twins cannot live without is their own. The inability of the twins to accept fully the extent of their love and commitment to one another produces an intense frustration which is expressed almost exclusively through their treatment of the women around them — both in the personal and professional realms.

The animus both twins express towards Claire surfaces in various forms. For instance, Claire comments to Bev about his and Eli's exceedingly intimate relationship, and questions him as to why his mother gave him a woman's name. Bev overreacts, demanding whether Claire is questioning his masculinity and implying that he may be homosexual. When Claire finds out that Bev has a brother, these issues are again insinuated in her comments "You live together. Do you sleep in the same bed?" and "... you can't get it up unless your brother is watching." Cronenberg overdetermines the reading of Bev by rendering him as being highly emotional, hysterical, in tears, etc. — traditionally feminine characteristics. When Bev, obviously drunk, disrupts a prestigious awards dinner in the Mantle brothers' honour, he sarcastically com-

ments that Eli gets all the recognition while he "slaves over the hot snatches" (ironically linking himself to the domestic sphere of the overworked, unacknowledged wife). On his part, Eli shows little interest in women beyond using them to assert his image as a successful "rich and famous" male. His disdain surfaces repeatedly in his treatment of both Claire and the sporadic appearances of his girlfriend, Cary/Heidi Von Palleske. The latter functions in a manner similar to that of the obligatory female in the male buddy films — she is there to ensure the viewer's acceptance of the male protagonist's heterosexuality. This is particularly obvious in the scene where she and Eli are dancing intimately and Eli wishes to include the distraught Bev in the sexual/romantic moment. Acting on Eli's suggestion, Cary begins to dance with Bev and Eli quickly joins in sandwiching Cary between them. Eli caresses both Cary and Bev as he murmurs to his brother, "stay with us, stay with me." The moment conveys the erotic desire Eli feels for Bev in tone if nothing else. The scene ends with Bev withdrawing and collapsing on the balcony. Eli stands frozen as Cary runs to give Bev mouth-to-mouth resuscitation; the action jars Eli and he rushes out, brutally shoving Cary aside to take over. Pointedly, the sequence both raises and simultaneously disavows the complex interconnection between the men's status as brothers/lovers. (A similar trajectory is evident in, for example, the girlfriend [Jamie Lee Curtis] and two brothers triangle [Ray Liotta, Tom Hulce] in *Dominick and Eugene*.) At times, these tensions surface in quasi-'humorous' moments like the one where Bev is frantically trying to reach Claire on location and speaks to her gay secretary over the phone. Bev suspects Claire of infidelity and tells the male voice that "... he is fucking a mutant." The film has notably called attention to the secretary's gay identity (evident in his initial response to the silence on the phone, "Is that you, Bob?", and gay-stereotype mannerisms) and what seems to be nothing more than a crude homophobic joke, functions to link a 'mutant' woman, a gay male and Bev. The comment is significant in that the issue of Claire's difference and the secretary's gayness is linked clearly to Bev's frustration resulting from his self-image as a perversion.

Bev's identification and simultaneous denial of his own differences, both in terms of gender characteristics and biology, is crucial to the twins' identity and profession which involves correcting forms of mutation and anatomical errors. The complex of fear and anxiety which both men experience (but particularly Bev) regarding their increasing inability to function in the 'normal' world, is projected onto women in ways which become more and more violent. The dubious Mantle Retractor evolves into Bev's medieval tools for correcting the female body. On the one hand the film has the potential to produce a trenchant critique of the way male power is articulated through technology in its subjugation of the female body; this appears to be the intention behind the scene where Bev is examining a woman in his office. Bev's comment to his patient after brutally and violently inserting his retractor into her body, "We have the technology, it couldn't possibly hurt," foregrounds the realities of masculine dominance being legitimized as the advances of medicine and science. When the female patient complains of pain and is silenced by Bev's denial that the perfected instrument could be at fault, she apologizes and retreats, saying, "I didn't mean to question it." The scene communicates poignantly the power invested in the doctor's position and the female's helplessness and vulnerability, strapped as she is into the stirrups (itself an image of potential torture). The critique is completely undermined as the scene progresses through Bev's



question, "Does it hurt when you have intercourse?" and "What did you have intercourse with?" followed by his story about a patient who had sex with a labrador retriever and "I thought maybe . . ." The shocking inappropriateness of such crass humour at this point (complemented by the woman's ordinary appearance and middle age) encapsulates Cronenberg's frat-house sensibility which negates the complexity of responses previously set-up. Bev's obviously disturbed disposition isn't enough of a reason to justify the audience's invitation to read the scene as being funny. (During both public screenings we attended this scene elicited laughter, however uneasy.) The gross denigration of the female character is never acknowledged. When Eli later questions Bev in private about the examination, Bev's perspective is made clear. "There is nothing wrong with the instrument. It's the body — the woman's body was all wrong." Within a critical context this statement could give full recognition to the manner in which the patriarchal underpinnings of the medical system entrenches its control through the utilisation of late capitalist technology. This is alluded to in the scene in the operating room where the hierarchy of power is evident in the nurse's compliance with the deranged doctor's order to try out his new phallic-like tools. Significantly, the scene, which is intended to be both horrific and comic, fails to provide a critical placement for the viewer. Although the film maintains a degree of distance from Bev's increasingly warped perspective, he and Eli remain *Dead Ringers*' central voice and one's objectivity is confounded by one's empathy and orientation towards the twins as all the other characters remain undeveloped. (The director's intense identification with the twins, particularly Bev, was made evident strikingly in Cronenberg's numerous acceptance speeches at the Genie Awards. He repeatedly made reference to his identification with Bev, the soft-spoken twin who is uncomfortable with public performance.)

Cronenberg works within the traditions of classical realist cinema which includes the convention of viewer identification with the lead protagonist(s). On the one hand, *Dead Ringers* doesn't fully exploit the mechanics of viewer identification but, on the other, the film avoids the construction of a coherent critical position towards Eli and Bev. One can contrast Cronenberg's handling of his protagonists to that of Hitchcock's use of Scottie/Jimmy Stewart in *Vertigo*. There, the male hero, initially the figure of identification, is progressively revealed to be obsessive/sick/abusive; the audience's empathy and identification gradually transfers from Scottie to the woman's position (Judy/Kim Novak) in the latter half of the film giving the viewer a critical perspective from which to access Scottie's behaviour. In *Dead Ringers*, Cronenberg romanticizes Eli and Bev and documents their emotional and physical breakdown at great length without providing any counterpoint position to that of the twins.

In the final quarter of the film the men's subconscious/resistant identification with the position of the feminine is crystallized in the climactic sequences; Bev discovers that his 'gynecological instruments for working on mutant women' can be used on Eli who becomes a willing participant in his ritual dismemberment. Ironically, the act of mutilation/castration is their final act of unification. Like so much of the film, these scenes do not allow for a coherent reading. Instead, the exploitation of the grotesque mystifies its purpose. It alludes to the tangle of issues previously summoned forth: the dream of severing and birth which Bev experiences while sleeping with Claire who in the dream is responsible for the separation through her biting a membrane connecting the two; the metaphor of Chang and Eng, the Siamese twin

brothers who could not live without each other; the doctor's final identification with their female patients who are in need of the Mantle twins' expertise to become fertile, and consequently give birth. To add further complications, the erotic connotations of the procedure (Eli lying in the gynecological chair while the doctor penetrates) are both evoked and denied by the twins' regression to childhood. Throughout the denouement, when the twins sequester themselves in their apartment, their speech/actions through their drug-induced perceptions recall their happy experiences as boys. (The sequence produces a narrative closure as the story begins with those same happier fraternal times where girls figure as biological curiosities). After the hallucinatory operation/killing of Eli, Bev wakes up and dresses. Bev is in the foreground of the frame, and never turns to notice Eli strapped and disembowelled in the chair behind him. He leaves to call Claire, and as he reaches the phone booth outside, Bev looks back and decides to rejoin his brother: the moment signifies fully Bev's recognition of his preference for Eli over Claire. In the film's final shot, a slow track over the doctors' blood splattered and debris strewn office, the dead twins are found huddled on the floor. Bev is holding Eli and is crouched in a fetal-position, fulfilling the Chang/Eng allegory recalled earlier.

*Dead Ringers*' final statement, as articulated repeatedly in the Cronenberg oeuvre, promotes a trajectory towards the inevitability of death over any life-sustaining values. The underpinning of the film's position is rooted facilely in a Romantic tradition where the yearning for death and defeat overrides vital alternatives. The implied nihilism suits Cronenberg's views on art which he professes should be distinct from social/cultural/political concerns. In this case, the author's intentions comply with the regressive political point-of-view offered by the film. The politics of social change in terms of gender and sexuality are consciously rejected for an endorsement of the continuation of the status quo and traditional masculine/heterosexist attitudes towards these concerns. The film goes so far as to condemn the modern in terms of an aesthetic as well as any progressive connotations it embodies. The Mantle twins are visually engulfed by the cold steel/glass structures in which they live and work. Cronenberg further reinforces the sterility of the environment through colour: blue/grey tones, a monochromatic palette, the ashen makeup used on Jeremy Irons. This is counterpointed by the red tones of the surgical priesthood taken up in the film's final scenes depicting lavishly the bloodied death ceremony.

Under the guise of a perfected style comfortably signifying High Art one finds the natural evolution of the indulgent nauseating violence executed in earlier Cronenberg works like *Shivers*, *Rabid*, *The Brood*, *The Fly* and the same abhorrence of the body and sexuality. Besides the allusions to Romanticism, *Dead Ringers* borrows the vestiges of respectability from German Expressionism, playing on the Doppelgänger motif through the doubling of Irons as twins and the visualization of their expressive states, the ethos of doom, the fears of the sexual and the emotional, the presentation of a world out of control. Most significant is the world view presented which privileges destiny over social responsibility, languishing in its defeatism.

One's desire to support the Canadian cinema need not blind one from an openly critical evaluation of a cultural work. *Dead Ringers* does not deliver the necessary critique demanded of the issues set forth. Ultimately, it is complicit with the system of oppression against which it purportedly protests. □



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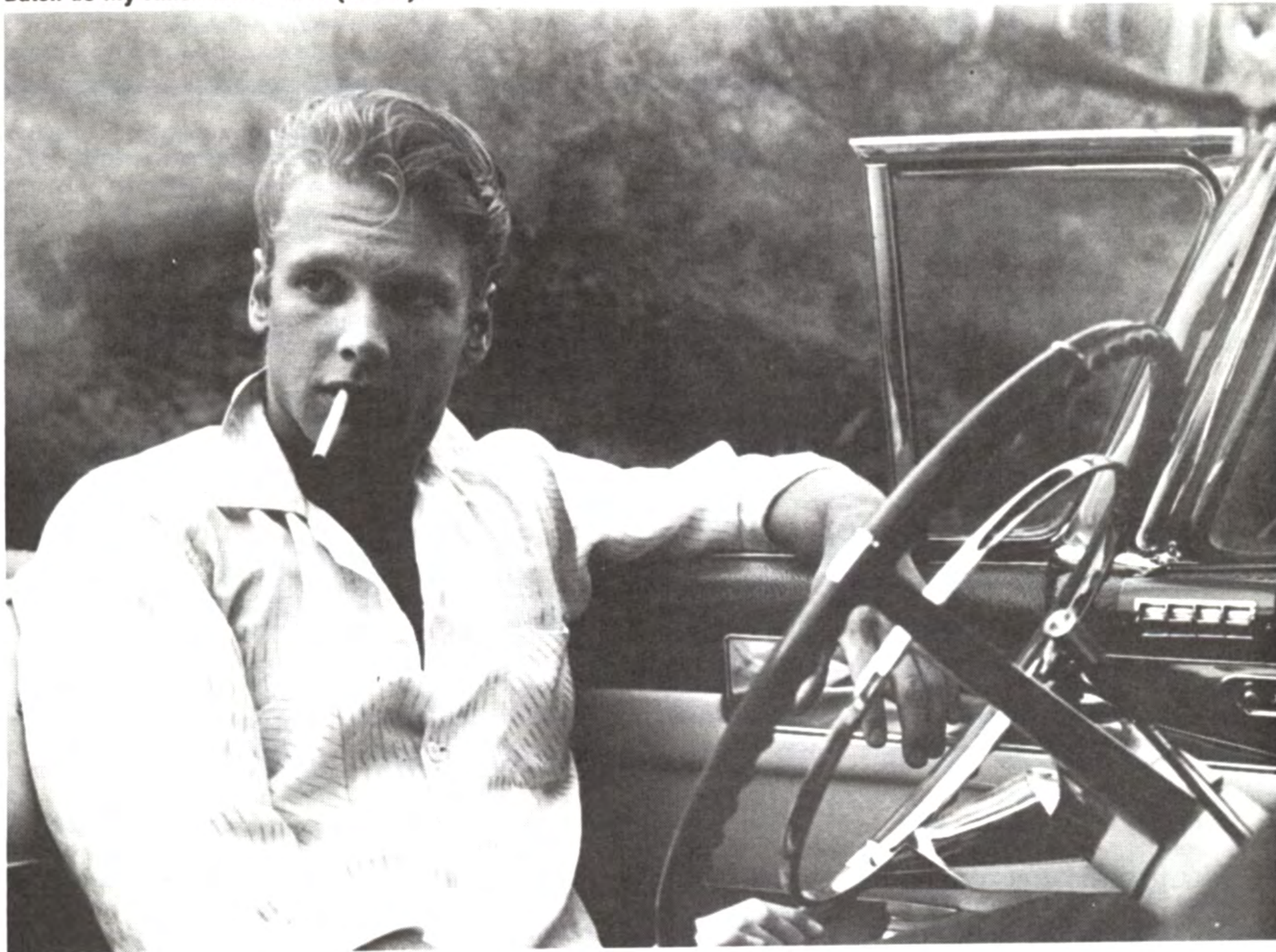
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Butch as *My American Cousin* (1985).



## WHO IS THE AMERICAN COUSIN?

### Canadian cinema, cultural freedom, and Sandy Wilson's *American Cousin*

by Joanne Yamaguchi

Sandy Wilson's *My American Cousin* (1985) addresses crucial questions about Canadian cinema and culture in relation to American cinema and culture. It does this with a simplicity from which a certain degree of self-consciousness is absent; this very simplicity is just the point to be made about Canadian cinema and cultural experience.



#### WHO IS THE AMERICAN COUSIN?

**T**welve-year old Sandra, narrator/protagonist of Wilson's film tells us at the beginning, "I first saw my American cousin in the golden summer of 1959." She finishes the story about those few golden days in the epilogue: "I don't recall ever seeing my American cousin again."

Sandra's protected English-Canadian universe, though subjected to the American cousin, emerges quite free from contamination by him. Just as her introduction and dismissal of him function like filmic bookends, the AC-intrusion is itself contained unproblematically within Sandra's experience. We never really get to know "Butch," except in association with rock 'n roll lyrics such as,

who—ee baby, won't you let me take you on a scenic cruise  
who—ee who—ee baby

be my guest  
ya got nothin' to lose  
won't ya let me take you on a scenic cruise



Sandra *wants* to be taken on a scenic cruise, but her parents and universe gently hold her to Paradise Ranch.

As for the American cousin, he drives in the night to Paradise Ranch in a Cadillac Eldorado. He keeps the scene happening, so to speak, but ever so lightly and briefly. If James Dean had come to town, he would have planted seeds of destruction within Sandra, in a spiritual sense, of course. Her Paradise-based universe would have been punctured forever. All manner of dread and uncertainty would have gained entry to her sacred ground. Nor would James Dean have allowed himself to be retrieved and driven back to California by his parents. This action both visually and psychologically humiliates Butch, and intimates his unimportance. He has been no more than a slight digression. Sandra can return to whatever she was doing before the intrusion.

It is the familial structure which has Sandra's primary loyalty. The second-hand James Dean American cousin doesn't have a chance against these odds. He seems more like an apparition than a "real person" perhaps to himself as well as to Sandra.

## WHO IS SANDRA?

If cousin Butch's James Dean impersonation is reflected by "let me take you on a scenic cruise," Sandra's lyrics should be,

there's a bluebird on your windowsill,  
there's a rainbow in your sky . . .

Lyrics throughout the soundtrack of the film waver between nostalgic evocation and detached recollection of old rock'n'roll classics.

Cousin Butch looks very golden, blonde, tanned, "cool," and not a bluebird or rainbow type at all. Nonetheless, Sandra is dying for life to happen, having just scrawled in her journal, NOTHING EVER HAPPENS. Despite the fact that the two cousins have spent most of their time being rude to one another (Butch tells Sandra and her young friends, "I don't want to hurt your feelings, but you're all ugly"), Sandra cries when Butch's departure is imminent. This is because all of the "excitement" he has brought with him (i.e., trouble he has caused) will come to an end. What has taken place during that golden episode to warrant tears? Apart from listening to lots of rock'n'roll on Butch's transistor radio, NOTHING. No cultural hybridity emerges from Sandra's summer experience with Butch. He can just take his contamination potential and go back home. Butch does in fact receive this advice from angry Lenny whose steady girlfriend, Shirl, has been seduced by him. Incidentally, even though Shirl has been contaminated by Butch, it must not be very deep, as Sandra informs us in the epilogue that Lenny and Shirl were married.

Sandra is tearful when Butch leaves. Her mother consoles her, "Sandra, as you get older you'll see — boys are like buses. If you miss one, another will be along before you know it." This bit of folk wisdom remains intact for Sandra. She observes in the epilogue that her mother was right. The American cousin is given this final demotion. He might as well have been just another boy on a bus. He represents no threat whatever to a genuine Canadian girl, domiciled at Paradise Ranch, which is probably the secret dream of many a nomad.

Sandra is not only in control of her life, she also controls the film quite effectively with an odd detachment. Sandra is ruthless with herself, not afraid to admit that she is not beautiful. Butch, much more vain, treats himself as though he were a film icon. Perhaps this is why he has no real power to

change the structures of Sandra's universe. In terms of narrative, Sandra's plan was to run away with Butch, but it would be inconsistent for her to stick with him for long. She is much too sensible.

It is as though Sandra's sensible nature dictates Butch's iconographical as well as psychological humiliation at the end. He must sit beside his mother like a boy (not even the rebel badge of "prisoner" is granted to Butch) as she drives him back to California. When Butch is not behind the wheel, not in the driver's seat, he's not only not cool, he's nearly not present at all.

## PARENTS AND PARADISE

Sandra inherits strength of character and presence from the familial structure. Her parents would not even entertain the idea of a devalued universe. The American parents have long since succumbed to a crass reduction of existence. Almost immediately upon arrival at Paradise Ranch to retrieve Butch, the American dad asks Sandra's dad, "What's a place like this worth, John?" John, offended by his brother's indelicacy, responds tersely, accusingly, "You always have to put a price tag on things."

The film is replete with implied as well as explicit expressions of differences between the two sets of parents: Canadian dad is a man of honour and values/American dad reduces everything to money; Canadian mother rehearses part in *Hedda Gabler* for local theatre production, while canning cherries and talking to daughter Sandra/American mother looks like an ex-showgirl from Las Vegas and seems more worried about her Cadillac Eldorado than about son Butch. In other words, the Canadian parents and the American parents seem to act as ambassadors from Paradise and from the Minotaur-haunted Labyrinth, respectively.

## BOLD STROKES IN FILM FORM

There is no character development in the film, not even in Sandra. The exaggerated characterizations of the parents, and solid cutting back and forth between them to accentuate the contrast even more, function as substitutes for the absent character development. There is no interesting exchange between the two sets of parents, (i.e. two sets of cultural conditions) just as there had been none between Butch and Sandra. Basically, he gives her his transistor radio. That's it. Cultural exchange ended. Status quo maintained. Finally, the American family exits with no discernable trace of having touched Canadian soil at all. To the very end, Sandra's uncle insists on calling her "Ruthie."

Wilson's film possesses a freedom born of simplicity analogous to the simplicity of the protagonist's universe. It does not follow Butch's nomadic, American "freedom." Sandra is free in a way that cousin Butch will never be. She refuses to buy into second-hand experiences, in part because there are not that many of them around. The movie *Rebel Without A Cause* hasn't even come to town yet. Furthermore, from the sounds of the epilogue, Sandra does not travel "down there" (to California) where second-hand experiences flow like water from a tap. She seems to have remained "up here" in Canada. In the English-Canadian uncontaminated universe, the "up here/down there" locations seem to imply an actual vertical "up" and "down." The labyrinth and Minotaur are Down There, while we are Up Here in Paradise.

Butch, on the other hand, travels and conceptualizes laterally. He sees too many movies, has horrible parents, combs his hair too much, and gets girls pregnant. His sort of freedom is the freedom to be insatiable. He will never enjoy the





kind of calm inner freedom that Sandra possesses. He is in a constant condition of contamination where nothing is sacred. For him, perhaps cynicism is the only possibility. For Sandra it may be an impossibility.

Wilson's film is analogously noncynical. It isn't a great film, nor an exciting one. It seems more appropriate to call it a "true" film, true to itself in the way that Sandra remains true to herself. It is a light truth, a young and untroubled truth, but a truth nevertheless.

In its speaking truly, testifying to a genuine Canadian experience, the film achieves the peculiar sort of validity possessed by an individual who commands respect if not love from others. The individual is respected for *not* being a carbon copy.

A passing comparison between *My American Cousin* and the George Lucas film *American Graffiti* (1973) will help to illustrate the distinction I am drawing between Canadian and American culture. The two films have in common a voice-over narrator as well as an epilogue. These filmic devices allow the filmmaker to frame what may have been highly emotional and confusing experiences in a snapshot format. The story emerges as a series of snapshots, a flip down memory lane through an epochal photograph album.

It is perhaps the clarified focus at the end of each of the films that illustrates my point. The epilogue of *My American Cousin* is warm and positive (Mom was right, boys *are* like buses). Even its negative aspects are without a bitter edge (never saw my American cousin again), since no news is good news in the sphere of epilogues. By contrast, the *American Graffiti* epilogue is tainted with an underlying resentment, a cynicism implying that people and situations of great promise inevitably fall from Grace (a promising student becomes a car salesman).

## **NOSTALGIA, NIHILISM, TEA?**

**M**y *American Cousin* is not a work embodying nostalgia if that condition requires a sense of irrevocable loss. In closing the door to complexity, Wilson seems also to close the door to nostalgia. The past has not been lost. It is more or less the same universe now as it was then. Wilson isn't a nomad; she isn't schizophrenic; she isn't indulgently subjective; she isn't suffocated by high density population or by excessive consumerism. Free from conditions such as these which might drive one to a state of nostalgia, she makes a film free both from nostalgia and from nihilism. The Canadian experience as depicted is hopeful rather than nihilistic. Perhaps it is the nihilist strains within American culture that find a temporary antidote in nostalgia.

The simple, firm principles given to Sandra by her parents prevail over the dangerous lack of principles suggested by her American cousin. In fact, his destructive effect on Sandra does not extend beyond causing her to miss tea with the family. The tender sapling has weathered the winds of nihilism that blew in the summer of '59. The shape of the grown tree is much as it would have been had Sandra's American cousin never caused a digression. Sandra would even have missed tea occasionally, with or without him. It would seem that Wilson is, 26 years later, not nostalgic after all: the past has been preserved like the delicious cherries which she helped her mother prepare. Having a lifetime supply of red cherries, Wilson is not in need of recovering any from the past. Her American cousin will not be so fortunate with his Cadillac Eldorado — "stolen" from his mother. Will he be forced to continue to steal cars and experiences in his universe Down There? □





# UNDERGROUND

by Bryan Bruce

*I recently interviewed G.B. Jones and Bruce LaBruce, a couple of underground Toronto film-makers, at their crummy, squat-like apartment on the wrong side of Toronto.*

**BB:** Well, what are your favourite Canadian films, I might well ask, since this is the special Canadian issue of *CineAction*!?

**GB:** My favourite documentaries are *Warrendale* and *Crash'n'Burn*,\* while my favourite fiction films are *Sonatine* and *Homer*.

**BLaB:** *That Cold Day in the Park* and *Out of the Blue*. I know, I know they're not *really* 'Canadian' films, but they were both shot in Vancouver, and, well, they *seem* Canadian. I think it was brilliant of Altman to introduce *That Cold Day in the Park* with the words "Vancouver, B.C." after the credits to identify explicitly that it was an American film being shot in a Canadian city. Of course, Cronenberg inverted the idea a decade later in *Dead Ringers*, opening the film with the title "Toronto, Canada" to comment on the phenomenon of American film-makers disguising

Toronto to look like various US cities. Everyone in the audience at the Toronto film festival seemed to think this was extremely clever of Cronenberg, which is interesting, considering *Dead Ringers* is by far his worst film, combining empty American commercialism with the most unfortunate aspects of his early films, i.e., an unbridled and nefarious sexism. And I mean, what is it with Cronenberg and this trendy flirtation with homosexuality? With *Dead Ringers* he de-homosexualized an explicitly gay story, reducing it to an ugly subtext, and now he wants to make the film version of Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*?

**GB:** You're right. Getting back to this Canadian film thing, I have to say I think the whole notion of a 'nationalist' cinema is really corrupt — very dangerous. That's why I don't like to make that kind of artificial distinction between 'Canadian films' and films shot in Canada.

**GB:** I think it's really misguided to attempt to concoct a cinematic national identity that exists for its own sake, as if you're constructing a model of what it's like to be Canadian for an outside audience. Any national identity is reactionary and something to rebel against, to make an obvious point.

**BLaB** She's right.



**GB:** A national identity is just an excuse to get an audience into the theatre to see a bad movie. Take *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, for example. Hailed as a Canadian classic, it glorifies a boy who learns how to exploit his friends and become a good capitalist.

**BB:** But that's in the book!

**GB:** Yeah, the book's bad, too. And it's a national treasure.

**BLaB:** She's right, you know.

**GB:** Contrary to popular belief, the Canadian national identity in film which is most popularly accepted is not based on failure, but on various models of success, often within the confines of such male-oriented occupations as the sports, business, and entertainment worlds (*Face-Off*, *The Terry Fox Story*, *Duddy Kravitz*, *Outrageous*). The most successful Canadian films for me are about 'failure' — the failure of both the film and the characters within it to achieve an approved identity in these terms — I'm thinking of movies like *Out of the Blue*, *Sonatine*, *Homer*, *Rip-Off*, *Nobody Waved Good-bye* . . .

**BLaB:** Yeah, why is it that sports is so integral to widespread notions of Canadian success? The biggest Canadian stars are sports figures — Wayne Gretzky, Terry Fox, Ben Johnson. I was so happy when Ben Johnson was dethroned.

**BB:** Yay!

**BLaB:** It was as if the whole country's reputation rested on his shoulders, and he totally ruined it.

Coincidentally or not, even a Canadian product exported to the US, like Michael J. Fox, seems to have this success formula built into its persona — the young successful capitalist obsessed with money, both on TV — the Alex Keaton character on *Family Ties* — and in films (*The Secret of My Success*). I think Michael J. Fox is one of, if not the most, hideously reactionary figures in modern cinema. I mean, it even comes through in a low-budget rip-off film like *Teen Wolf*. Instead of the tortured juvenile delinquent of '50s films like *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* whose horrific trans-

formation signifies sexual tensions, family problems, and so on, Fox's werewolf is a high school jock who becomes even more popular and successful as a monster, and he's just following in the footsteps of his Dad! Paul Schrader is the only film-maker who's really understood the significance of the Michael J. Fox persona, casting him in *Light of Day* as the archetypal American neo-conservative, and setting his Christian family values against Joan Jett's fierce individualism and contempt for authority, which the film celebrates. That's why it was such a flop. But don't get me started on Michael J. Fox . . .

**BB:** Is there anything coming out of Canada now that goes against these tendencies you're talking about?

**GB:** I think *DeGrassi Junior High*, the TV show, represents a move away from the nationalistic success story stuff that's supposed to prove the worth of the Canadian 'industry' or something. For one thing, it's more personal. And it's designed for a youth audience, so it has to allow the teens to test the limits of authority, and even transgress them. Even if the kids fail on their own, at least they're discovering the limitations of their freedom. That kind of 'liberalism' on TV isn't really all that readily available, but when it does exist, offers all kinds of 'marginal' characters, from the beatnik on *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* in the early '60s to the punks and skinheads of *DeGrassi Junior High*. That kind of sweeping pluralism is endemic to TV, covering all the bases, hoping for a hit. Canadian cinema is kind of similar, resulting in films like *Homer*, *Rip-Off*, and *Nobody Waved Good-bye*, with the same kind of alienated youth as on *DeGrassi Junior High*, the same refusal to be assimilated, or, more importantly, to accept their alienated state. Take, for instance, the season when Spike, the junior high punk, and one of the central characters, was pregnant and unwed and forced to drop out by the school board. Although almost all the students sided with Spike, lodged formal protests and applied informal pressure on various adults to allow her to stay, they soon learned how repressive an institutional education can be. Two disparate subcultures are united in Spike's



**Bruce LaBruce in *Boy/Girl*.**





## Pin

struggle as the skinhead girl on the show fights for her cause, but to no avail. Spike gets turfed.

**BLaB:** *DeGrassi Junior High* also works because it's so specific — it's regional, as opposed to national, in appeal, concentrating on the day to day lives of a single community. The characters define their own identities in this context, and are not expected to represent any national character or junk like that. That's why there's no real recognized Canadian underground film movement(s) — if a film's purpose isn't reducible to an attempt to contribute in some way to the construction of a 'Canadian film establishment,' it isn't deemed relevant or necessary. Super-8, for example, is not regarded as a legitimate film form on its own terms, but merely as an initial step in the quest for the Canadian success story. The economy of super-8 presupposes a more personal set of concerns grounded in the politics of everyday life, a project antithetical to a national, homogenizing consciousness.

**GB:** Yeah, but what does me filming you getting your nipple pierced in *The Troublemakers* have to do with Canada's dream of a brighter tomorrow?

**BB:** *Actually, I'm glad you brought that up, because I wanted to ask you about your own films. I understand you're working on a video compilation of your super-8 movies?*

**GB:** Yeah, we're doing it in conjunction with our silly little fanzine, *J.D.s*, a small publication made by, for, and about homopunks. Although all the film-makers involved in the project are Canadian, we're not interested in being motivated by any nationalistic purpose. We're more concerned

with reaching an international audience that can relate to the personal political impetus behind the films. We don't want the work to be fixed in those terms.

**BB:** *How are your films politically personal?*

**GB:** Well, we just make films about the daily goings-on at our house, like people getting tattooed or pierced, or putting cigarettes on their tongues.

**BLaB:** Well, there are films about me and my boyfriend and all the trouble we get into, and like how difficult it is for boys to give each other blow-jobs in public, and then there's a film in which her girlfriends go shoplifting and promote petty crimes and go around in a gang beating up rapists, harrassing stupid men and stuff like that. Practical things. Like also how difficult it is for hustlers to make a living in Toronto, especially since the police chased them away from the Y. Or like when the house we're living in gets condemned by city officials because the landlord won't fix the gaping hole in the ceiling that racoons are coming in through (which is in the film, by the way), then we just make a movie about it. Don't you think that's more relevant than making a film about sandblasting your house or working in an art gallery or how you made your first million? People think being political means voting every four years for an imperceptibly new national identity. Well, they're wrong. A blow job can be more political than casting a ballot.

**BB:** *What films are going to be on the videotape?*

**BLaB:** So far: *I Know What It's Like To Be Dead* and *Boy/Girl*, G.B. Jones' *The Troublemakers*, Tab Twain's *Sex Bomb*, plus a couple of dyke films, and some old found super-8 sex movies that we're adding our own soundtracks to in order to make fun of conventional gay male icons, particularly as depicted in mainstream homosexual pornography.

**BB:** *Is there going to be a screening of these films in Toronto?*

**GB:** Possibly, but it's pretty hard to find a place these days that will accept this kind of material. We're going to be showing them in Montreal soon. They seem to be much more open to such things there.

**BLaB:** Actually, yeah, most of the things we've been saying about the Canadian film industry don't really apply to the Quebec cinema, obviously. There are some fabulous Quebecois films. Although I have to say, *Un Zoo La Nuit* is one of the worst films I have ever seen. It's one of the few films I've walked out on, and I go see *everything*. I had to leave when they shot that poor elephant.

**BB:** *Is there anything else you have to say for yourselves?*

**BLaB:** I'd like to say that Sandor Stern's *Pin*, which recently flopped, is one of the best Canadian films I've seen in a long time. And I think it flopped partly because it didn't conform to the kind of success formula we were talking about earlier. It didn't make a big point about being Canadian, you know? It was a personal story that anyone could relate to, especially if you're schizophrenic.

**GB:** Buy the *J.D.s* videotape when it comes out, and support your local underground. □

\* *Crash'n'Burn* is a super-8 movie that was significant in the development of the 'punk scene' (aesthetically and otherwise), and recognized as such. It wasn't even remotely connected to anything 'nationalistic' and wasn't regarded as 'successful' by any mainstream media, yet it was exhibited all over North America and England and received excellent reviews in the alternative press.





NFB head John Grierson examines poster designs (1944).



# Grierson

## and Canadian Nationalism

by Scott Forsyth

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*The Colonized Eye: Rethinking the Grierson Legend*

by Joyce Nelson

Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988

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**J**ohn Grierson, that “father” of documentary film, the founder of Canada’s revered National Film Board, has inspired generations of British and Canadian hagiography. Recently, the man’s ambiguous politics, restrictive aesthetics and legacy of state propaganda have been scrutinized more critically by several researchers. Nelson builds on this research to launch a devastating attack on Grierson, and has likely permanently knocked the great man off his pedestal. This is a welcome accomplishment and the book contributes to the renewal of serious critical thinking about documentary and cultural politics, both in Canada and internationally.

Nelson follows Grierson’s career from the Rockefeller fellowship days in the ’20s to his persecution by Hoover in the ’40s. It is an aggressive and entertaining re-telling, part muckraking, part conspiracy tale. The evidence of Grierson’s byzantine state and corporate manoeuvres, extensive and confusing writing, and the films of the NFB during his tenure are placed in the context of changes in world capitalism over those years. She concludes that Grierson was not the “left-wing populist” she had supposed or the liberal modernizer and facilitator of Canadian nationalism usually claimed by his supporters.<sup>1</sup> Documentary, for Nelson’s Grierson, was a public relations arm for emergent multinational capitalism.

Far from incidental to a socially conscious aesthetic, state and corporate sponsorship was basic to documentary’s mission to “educate” — in fact, incorporate, integrate, indoctrinate — citizens in their passive roles in the corporate-dominated new order. Grierson’s goal was the “manufacture of consent” — the chilling phrase of Walter Lippman, his mentor in the role of communications in the new “mass society.” Far from the charming tyrant of memoirs, this Grierson is a propagandist not unlike the Nazis and, in his thought and practice, a “totalitarian.” For the most part, the attack is plausibly argued and doubtless Grierson loyalists will be preparing outraged protests. However, the book’s eventual focus is this villain’s damage to Canadian national culture and its polemical zeal, not to mention its metaphoric title, derive from a relentlessly nationalist perspective. While it is partly a clash of *partis pris* — it seems obvious to me that nationalism in advanced capitalist Canada, “progressive,” cultural or blatantly reactionary, has an inevitably bourgeois and rightward logic — this perspective tends to submerge the book’s radical thrust and weaken its interpretative edge.

### OIL AND IDEOLOGY

**M**ost nationalists like to keep their heads firmly in the clouds of spirit and identity but Nelson attempts to place her subject’s intellectual and aesthetic practices always in “political and economic context.” The greasy trail of international Oil is followed throughout the book to illustrate the pervasive power of corporate America. The Rockefeller connection also establishes the special relationship between Grierson and Prime Minister Mackenzie King, which is followed intellectually through their training in the two new corporate “sciences” of early monopoly capitalism



— industrial and public relations. When placed beside Grierson's propaganda for the Empire Marketing Board in the '30s, the antagonistic division in documentary history between state and corporate "advertising" and the committed work of socialists and Communists has rarely been made more clear.

Perhaps most devastating to Grierson's reputation is Nelson's dogged tracing of his writing, speeches, memos. His commitment to international capitalism, to colonialism, to authoritarian control of the masses is clearly displayed. It may be she goes too far in trying to definitively conclude he was a totalitarian and perhaps a Nazi sympathizer (she extends Peter Morris's more cautious analysis). The label totalitarian is an unstable and discredited concept; Grierson's excessive rhetoric is filled with the simpler hubris of the technocrat who forgets he is a servant of the ruling class. Its ideological instability — liberal, fascist, social democratic and Stalinist residue — also speaks to the uncertain character of state formation and social reform in this period. The process was described in all these ways, attracted and confused even progressive intellectuals and resulted in a post-war state characterized as all of corporate, liberal, welfare and security. In that context, it seems unfair to imply that the tricky Scot simply duped his reformist co-workers. Though few will want to resurrect a progressive Grierson, there is a sense here that Nelson is simply reversing the hagiography by demonizing. Similarly, few readers will be as outraged as Nelson over the bland liberal admonishments against "excessive" nationalism she offers as colonialist arrogance, given the NFB's nationalist purposes.

This biographical excavation is intersected with a national drama for Canada and its film culture. Nelson again skewers conventional wisdom. Grierson's work with the Board did not assure the flowering of a national cinema built upon the socially more noble educational alternative to crass Hollywood. Instead, he assured the Canadians would simply fill the margins of the film world, while suppressing desires to make feature fiction at the Board, even plotting the notorious Canadian Co-operation Agreement (where Hollywood films mentioned Canada in return for non-competition in entertainment films: Americans get to have all the fun). Hence the deformity, if you hold an organic model of national cinema, of the long delayed development of fiction film here. This will challenge the nationalists who have celebrated that very marginality or tied the national character to the documentary form. Grierson's subordination of the NFB to elaborate dealings with Hollywood, Standard Oil, British documentary and even the shadowy Imperial Relations Trust is presented in all its opportunistic and devious detail: it only makes sense within the ideological frame.

## NATIONALISM AND CAPITALISM

**T**he centrepiece of the book is a series of chapters analysing the films made at the Board during the war — both in the prestigious *Canada Carries On* and *World at War* newsreels and in the many films made for Canadian consumption. This is compelling and closely argued criticism. It speaks as well to a subterranean current in Canadian culture — hatred of the hallowed NFB and all of state paternalistic culture. We all remember our dreary fifth grade enforced film-watching or the interminable wait for the feature during the NFB short. The films Nelson describes warrant that hatred, and she finds the audiences felt much the same way. The films' aesthetic and political strategies seem to be uniformly obnoxious and repressive; the anti-fascist films are

authoritarian calls to collective obedience: the Canadian films are filled with happy ethnics or cheerful workers in Labour-Management Production Committees (King's company unions). In the finest of Canadian traditions, it is the state itself which is the hero of most of these films. This criticism is more thorough than any done previously and it is even more powerful when placed with an emotional account of the repression against minorities, unions, Communists and foreigners throughout the '30s and '40s. It is especially invigorating to see the "democracies'" internal repression sharply exposed and compared to the conduct of the Fascists.

But the conclusions to these critical discussions are sometimes not drawn far enough. The condemnation of the Allies' home policies does not lead to discussion of the war in general as imperialist, but to the traditional Canadian complaint of lack of respect for "our" sacrifices. The attack on the aesthetics of the authoritarian state documentary does not lead to the oppositional alternative of committed work but to the bland celebration of "the local and the particular" in a few tourism ads. Most strikingly, the discussion of cultural and political repression, for "national purposes" and to "diminish sectionalism," a textbook case of repressive Canadian nationalism, does not lead to a critique of nationalism but to an evasive condemnation of internationalism and Anglo-colonialism — that is, the roots of Canadian nationalism to me, a contemporary reality to Nelson.

These limits are clearly because her concerns are with the national drama on a grand scale. Through these chapters, Nelson has put her nationalist cards on the table. She compiles a litany of familiar purple prose from nationalist cultural critics — Atwood, Crean, Smythe, Wilden, Frye (Grant is not mentioned, but his devils of America and Technocracy are obviously an influence). The issue moves from state and corporate control or Grierson's self-serving opportunism to the nation itself. Grierson was not just a bully institutionally subordinating Canadian film, he was orchestrating a loss of nationhood, the transition from British to American colony, the turning of the nation from its mission of uniqueness and self-identity . . . the sapping of its bodily fluids? This is partially an appeal to authorities and partly a simple ideological exchange with her audience — almost all Canadian cultural criticism is written in this heated melange of the political, cultural and spiritual — it is the ideology of the academic and cultural industries, the opiate of the intellectuals. Indeed the book gradually adopts the form most favoured by these critics — the lament — we could've been contenders, we could've been somebodies, we wuz robbed, we betrayed ourselves. Those ideologically immersed will be appropriately moved, those who do not define themselves by the national "we" will find the stance righteously unargued.

The charge of colonization puts Nelson on the militant wing of this ideology so central to official political and cultural discourse in Canada, or, with variations, in any capitalist nation. She goes so far as to quote Fanon on the psychology of the oppressed, equating Canada, with sublime radical cheek, then and now, with the Third World — poor Canadians, wretched of the earth, must pursue the most elementary goals and psychology of nationhood. Pinch yourself. Isn't Canada one of the richest industrial nations in the world, independent for over 120 years, led by a moderately successful capitalist class, with its own nation-state, with its own internally oppressed nations, its own repressive "bodies of armed men," its own multi-national world presence? Canada stands with the imperialist elite of the G-7: that it is dependent upon American capital should not obscure its status as a powerful associate. But, amazingly, Nelson doesn't seem to



think there is a Canadian capitalist class. To accord with her colonial drama, she offers the innovative category of the "Anglo-colonial interests" who sell us from Britain to America. Hence, the logic of invoking Third world nationalism for Canada's plight. (She also seems to have a naive faith in the success of such nationalism, which in most cases has led to neo-colonialist dictatorship, not liberation, as more careful scrutiny of the Mexican case she celebrates would have indicated). There seems little excuse for Nelson to ignore the extensive discussion in Canadian political economy, overwhelmingly against these spiritualist *cris de coeur*.

Nationalism, to me, objectively serves an existing bourgeois nation. If Canadian nationalism has often been bland and official, it still has a venerable and often vicious history. Certainly Canadian capitalists have never proclaimed a purely independent mission for themselves — an evident impossibility — and this frustrates our cultural nationalists who seek the chimera of a pure national culture. But not only does Nelson not see any Canadian capitalists, she thinks there has been no nationalism in Canada. This is a bizarre reading of Canadian history, but even in the book's narrow chronology, it leads Nelson to ignore the surge of nationalism between the wars, particularly around cultural issues and demands for state cultural agencies by the Canadian Radio League or the Fabians of the League for Social Reconstruction. These historical realities simply don't appear in the book — presumably because Nelson's criteria for nationalism is so purist — and the omission distorts her view of state management in the culture and economy.

While Nelson's perspective reprises the Canadian New Left's nationalist "deviation" in the early '70s, the book's contemporary influence relies on a surge of nationalism in recent years. This has encompassed a strengthening of Canadian capitalism in state-led, regional and multi-national growth, a progressive defense of the state's cultural and social services against conservative attacks, a rise in racist hysteria against immigrants and refugees and culminated in the recent Free Trade elections. Surely, this debacle should have given pause to those nationalists who wish to be progressive or to those who call for the purity of the national culture. *All* sides in the election were nationalist! The unions and the social democratic NDP dissipated the possibility of a mass movement based on clear class, leftist politics in a nationalist front with the ruling class Liberals and cultural nationalists. But the Conservatives triumphed with the confident nationalism of a mature capitalist class which wished to cut a deal in the big time. The bourgeois logic of nationalism could rarely have been so clear. The poor NDP suffered the electoral consequences of such opportunistic trailing: even the independent Left, in its journals like *Canadian Dimension* and *This Magazine*, called for votes for the Liberals — the progressive bourgeoisie at last!

## RAY'S OF HOPE?

**M**ilitant Canadian nationalists are usually pessimistic but Nelson's conclusions are daunting in the extreme. Grierson was part of the creation of a new world order Nelson calls "friendly fascism": the totalitarian domination of big business through the state, in a global economy, with mass subservience to oligarchic and technocratic authority ensured by the shaping of information and media spectacle. Nelson's radical anger is admirable. But even if we accept the rhetoric of this conceptual firestorm, the description of the world order conjures a monolithic homogeneity never really reached. Like many culture critics — from the Frankfurt School to the post-structuralists to the rightist scorners of

Mass Society — who have attempted to extrapolate social relations from a critique of the media, she paints a horrifying world in which class contradictions are submerged, and the masses appear as faceless automatons or victims. What is to be done? Could not this global nightmare only be opposed by socialist internationalism? Would not the tradition of class analysis more precisely dissect fissures in this whirl of power and powerlessness? No, to Nelson, this totalitarian order is in contradiction to liberal democracy and nationalism, in effect, playing outraged liberal to Grierson's cynical conservative, within the same view of the world. Even the most casual of observers would note that liberal democracy remains the form and ideology, the very strength, of class rule in advanced capitalism or that a more cohesively integrated world capitalism remains nationally based, is still riven by inter-national and inter-imperialist contradiction, and has hardly ruled out expressions of bourgeois nationalism. But intrepid nationalist logic prevails, there is hope; we conclude with . . . audience stats: oh, no Canadians watch too much American movies and TV, that's Grierson's villainous legacy, the failure of "Canadianization." The disparity between the extremism of the global diagnosis and the parochial therapy of nationalist cultural engineering is startling. (Again, it's virtually a generic requirement in Canadian criticism to conclude with the blandest posture of cultural reform, in the language of state policy, even if Nelson has gone much further in expressing hostility to the state.) We should recall that this hope in the national struggle is a militant version of state policies half a century old, that state culture in Canada is weighty, bureaucratic, subsidized, quota'd, that media corporations are a sector of considerable strength . . . This can all be dismissed by nationalists as inadequate to the purity of their vision — state cultural managers are happy to manoeuvre typical Canadian compromises between state, Canadian and branch-plant industries — but it is a material presence which lays bare the statist implications of nationalism.

Nelson's interesting work has effectively destroyed some of the myths about state culture and Grierson which have been prevalent for years. Her research is generally meticulous and diligent, it should point to much further work and debate. There is obviously a tendency for the book to build new myths, that in exchanging a Good for a Bad Father, Canadians can expel a demon, purifying and recuperating the same old nationalist shibboleths. It is certainly time for Canadian intellectuals to confront the political implications of the guilt-saving myth of colonization and the endless search for the pure national culture. However, the book's accessible and radical energies should, nonetheless, open up critical debate on progressive cultural practice in Canada.

## Notes

1. Off-hand, I can think of only one recent presentation of Grierson as "left-wing populist" — Rick Salutin's naive and adulatory television film *Grierson and Gouzenko* (CBC, 1986).

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*Bruce Bairnsfather*

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